jamit!

Journal of American Studies in Italy

**Watching the Watchmen:
The State of Policing in US
Cultural Production**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE EYES *ON* ALL PEOPLE: POLICING THE CITY UPON A HILL

Stefano Morello
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Marco Petrelli
University of Turin

In memoriam Giulio Regeni 1988-2016

In the spring of 2020, as the world struggled to grapple with the spread of COVID-19 and the "new normal" that ensued, the collective discourse on mass surveillance took the center stage. State practices meant to monitor the pandemic made some private citizens feel stripped of their privacy and civil liberties. If distance learning and remote work preserved the world's capacity to, at least seemingly, move forward, they also fostered the conditions of possibility for often unwanted and intrusive eyes to enter the private sphere of students, workers, and subordinate subjects in general, in the name of rigor, fairness, and productivity. The growing appeals to states of exception further called attention to the role of systematic policing in stabilizing authority. As surveillance capitalism entered a new phase, in which its panoptic gaze became more fluid, pervasive, and naturalized, we found ourselves in need to think deeper about the relationship between the figurative watchmen and those under their scrutiny.

On May 25th, the stream of news paced by data on the death toll of the virus and scrambled state officials press conferences, was disrupted by footage documenting Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. As Floyd repeated "I can't breathe" twenty-seven times over the course of 9 minutes and 29 seconds, our bodies felt the spectral reverberation of Eric Garner's words from six years earlier. Videos recorded by private citizens—yet another form of surveillance, enabled by technological development—of the deliberate and gratuitous killing of a black man, made an all too

Stefano Morello & Marco Petrelli |

common event in America the defining image of the nation in the summer of 2020. As Alessandro Portelli has suggested, the figure of Chauvin standing on Floyd's body produced a quasi-mythological resonance—the triumph of St. George slaying the dragon, the refiguration of a colonial white hunter kneeling beside his beastly prey for the photographer to capture the victory of civilization over savagery. Yet, Portelli continues, as suggestive as the interpretation of the symbolic might be, Floyd's public lynching is first and foremost a vividly violent representation of the United States' police apparatus and its brazen activity. What happened in Minneapolis is not to be de-materialized as a symbolic portrayal of power dynamics in the US, but rather to be taken as an all too concrete manifestation of "the current shape of relations of domination, naked violence, with neither fictions nor filters" (2020, 8).[1]

During the protests that followed Floyd's murder, Juvenal's question from *Satire VI*—"*quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*" or "who watches the watchmen?"—appeared on a wall in Washington DC. The Roman poet's words lived well beyond his intended meaning and became something of a universal rant against dictators and oppressive governments, and, as such, came to voice popular dissatisfaction with the state of policing (or the police state, according to some) in the US. The demonstrations across the nation, and the ensuing backlash from law enforcement and media outlets alike, reveal a deep-seated indignation towards the ways in which institutional policing consistently targets the subaltern in the name of a perfectly-engineered City Upon a Hill and the capitalistic permutation of its transcendental concept of social order. When John Winthrop declaimed his famous sermon on board of the *Arbella* on April 8, 1630, it's hard to imagine that he would anticipate the grandeur of his (somewhat paranoid, already) allegory of a "City Upon a Hill" slouching towards a fairly dystopian reality. Winthrop's vision, "the eyes of all people" turned upon the rising New World, can be retrospectively read as an early, if only metaphysical, figuration of panoptic undercurrents in the United States, which in time would develop into a far more

---

[1] Translated from Italian by the authors.

concrete surveillance and control apparatus enforced to safeguard social and ethical order.

As symbol and allegory, the "City Upon a Hill" continues to be part of the US public and political rhetoric—and so do its implicit accoutrements, whose diverse incarnations entered the literary discourse to be revealed and investigated, reproduced or challenged, by American literature throughout its historical evolution. From Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, literature has often reminded us that order, even when not deferred to the State, has been violently enforced through coercion, stigma, or segregation. Narratives produced by works such as W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and, more recently, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, offer figurations of the United States' leviathan policing apparatus, and proof of its sweeping power. Through such literary works, we are introduced to the ways in which the bodies of citizens are marshaled, revealing the momentous role of bio- and necropolitical powers in the social, political, and cultural definition of the subject. This is evident, for instance, in the US prison system, with its world-record constellation of institutions that actively re-design the institutional contours of national social inequality while also standing as a demonstration of how unfettered capitalism (even in its neoliberalist guise) predates on minoritarian and oppressed subjects for its reproduction.

If racialized violence that has been perpetrated since the Federalist Era through both institutional and private forms of racial policing reverberates in the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery, the protesting, marching, and rioting that ensued in the summer of 2020—culminating in the Defund the Police movement and in the deployment of federal troops to contain protests and protestors—point to the desire of new forms of governance (and self-governance) from the opposite poles of the political spectrum: a counter-apparatus from below, aiming to citizens empowerment and liberation, on the one hand, and what we may call a "neo-conservative revolution," aimed at preserving old white patriarchal structures. Filmmaker Stanley Nelson has described the early activities of the Black Panthers Party

in Oakland as "policing the police," at a time when police brutality towards the black community was believed to be at its height. In addition to providing food, clothing, and transportation, the Panther's community service programs, adequately called "survival programs," aimed at challenging, exposing, and preventing (often by all means necessary) police malpractice. Despite and because of the affordances of technology, such tactics of policing "from below" have grown exponentially in recent decades, as exemplified by the aforementioned recordings of Floyd's murder, a synecdoche for the countless witnesses and victims documenting abuses that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. Meanwhile, structured initiatives, such as the Immigrant Defense Project, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and Assata's Daughters, as well as other loose-knit groups of independent collectives, continue to provide support and essential care to minoritarian citizens, including the scrutiny of state policies (and policing practices) working to their detriment.

Yet, as the Defund the Police movement gained steam, the *other* America pushed back, relentlessly attempting to preserve an ever-failing status quo through means that increasingly exceed what Louis Althusser has called the State Repressive Apparatus and include an array of modalities perpetuated by private citizens. The social dystopia depicted in a number of artifacts from popular culture such as *The Walking Dead* (2010), *Revolution* (2012), and *Watchmen* (2019), predicted the schizophrenic wavering of self-styled right wing militia that we witnessed over the past two years. If in the spring of 2020 private police militia marched the streets to show their support to law enforcement (leading to, among other acts of violence, the shooting of two unarmed protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin at the hand of a 17 year old white man), six months later, on January 6th, 2021, a mob of supporters of President Donald Trump led an unprecedented attack on the United States Capitol.

The essays in this special issue not only aim to discuss representations and histories of police and polic*ing* in the United States but also analyze (and produce) counter-imaginaries, modes of care that aim at seeing, rather than watching, citizens and bodies. An investigation of the current state of policing in the US through its cultural production is not only useful to unveil the strategies of power currently

undergirding the layout of the American chessboard. Understanding the grammar of control that underlines quotidian social dynamics, a syntax that is embedded, reproduced, or denounced by literature and other cultural representations of our social reality, allows us to piece together the tiles that reveal the extraordinary extension of contemporary modes of state and corporate-sanctioned discipline and punishment. Acting, moving, exerting its power across race, gender, and class lines, the thousand-eyed leviathan of virtually unrestrained neoliberalist vigilance not only dispose of bodies, psyches, and identities, but in so doing it channels our understanding of such vital spheres, at the same time exerting its influence on society and leaving a mark in its cultural production.

In "Security and Surveillance: Los Angeles Police and Land Abuses in Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*," Antonio Di Vilio's reading of Thomas Pynchon's 2009 novel brings the politics and policing of public spaces in 1960s Los Angeles to the fore, shedding light on the processes that make a hyper-surveilled postmodern city the site for ideological clashes over the very meaning of freedom and civil rights. Dwelling on the ground of civil rights, yet at a different historical conjuncture, Andrea Carosso's "The Post-9/11 Security State: Surveilling America Arabs and Muslims in the 21st Century" provides an account of the September 11 attacks as a gateway to build what he calls "a massive surveillance apparatus." According to Carosso, the Bush administration's response to the attack resulted in the erosion of civil liberties and rights for ethnic and religious groups until then perceived as a "silent minority," despite their complex diasporic histories.

Lindsey Albracht and Amy J. Wan bring the conversation to a terrain most familiar to *JAm It!*'s readers. "Beyond 'Bad' Cops: Historicizing and Resisting Surveillance Culture in Universities" provides a much needed perspective on the role of surveillance technology in higher education, especially in the context of distance learning. Albracht and Wan make use of their personal experience as instructors at CUNY, the largest public university in New York City, to offer suggestions and alternatives to submitting pedagogy to surveillance culture.

Eva Puyuelo Ureña joins the rich debate around Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir *Between the World and Me* (2015) and provides a poignant commentary on the dynamics of empathy it fosters. Through the lens of black phenomenology, "Vessels of Flesh and Blood: Policing and Racial (Dis)Identifications in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*," reads the relationships between the paradigmatic abstraction of the Black body and its physical reality in their ability to forge a shared historical narrative innervated by trauma and discrimination. Likewise, in "Dialogically Destabilizing Discourses of Power/Knowledge in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," Zebulah Baldwin also investigates the power relations that determine the visibility or lack thereof of the black body. Baldwin proposes a sophisticated rhetorical and dialogical analysis of Ellison's celebrated novel. The essay tackles Ellison's representations of hierarchized subjects in mid-twentieth-century America, offering a new understanding of the unnamed protagonist's quest for visibility through the symbolic ambiguity that underlines his parable. From one of the most celebrated black US authors of the 20th century, Elisa Pesce takes us to one of the most engagé contemporary African American authors: Jesmyn Ward. Pesce highlights how the National Book Award-winning *Sing, Unburied, Sing* provides a commentary on the way the African American community has been pushed to the margins of citizenship through incessant necropolitical power. Through the analysis of the role of children in the novel, Pesce offers a fascinating scrutiny of the youngest generation's potentiality to redeem an otherwise marred socio-historical narrative.

This special issue of *JAm It!* on the role of acts and counteracts of surveillance in the definition of an unstable dialectics between the state and its citizens seems particularly relevant in light of 2021 marking the 20th anniversary of the Italian Republic's most ignominious act of police violence against its citizens: the 2001 raid on the "Armando Diaz" school in Genoa, an event that has been defined by Amnesty International as an example of "human rights violation never before seen in recent European history" (2018). On July 21st, just before midnight, almost 500 officers unleashed their bloodlust on the occupants of the building—unarmed protestors (many of them students and some of them underage) who had gathered in Genoa to march

against the world politics of the G8 leaders—resulting in 61 serious injuries. 222 protestors were later brought to a nearby temporary detention facility and savagely tortured. At a time when protests sparkled everywhere in the US, we couldn't help but remember that defining moment in our lives, one that shattered our trust in institutions before our political consciousness was even fully formed. The sense of helplessness our former selves felt, for a gratuitous act of violence towards citizens invested in their political commitment to create a more just world, pushed us to co-edit this special issue. The authors of the essays that follow, to whom goes our gratitude for their rigor and patience during the editorial process, each provide a small contribution to the understanding of what is needed, from a humanities perspective, to engage in that struggle.

Yet, as Jacques Derrida writes, no justice is possible without a principle of responsibility, of respect for those who are no longer, "be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism" (2006, xviii). As such, we would like to conclude by dedicating this issue to the memory of Giulio Regeni, a fellow Italian scholar and a devoted researcher at Girton College, whose hunger for knowledge made him the target of military brutality, torture, and ultimately, death in Egypt in the winter of 2016. To him, and to all those who struggle incessantly to foster our understanding of the processes that hinder, or promote, our vital quest for justice, also goes our unfailing gratitude.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amnesty International. 2018. "G8 di Genova: da 17 anni una ferita aperta." *Amnesty International Italia*, July 19, 2018. https://www.amnesty.it/g8-genova-17-anni-ferita-aperta/. (Accessed December 17, 2021.)

Derrida, Jacques. 2006. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge.

Portelli, Alessandro. 2020. Il ginocchio sul collo. *L'america, il razzismo, la violenza tra presente, storia e immaginari*. Roma: Donzelli Editore.

Stefano Morello & Marco Petrelli |

Stefano Morello is a curator, cultural historian, and doctoral candidate in English and American Studies at The Graduate Center, CUNY and a Digital Pedagogy Fellow at The City College of New York. His academic interests include pop culture, urban studies, poetics, and digital humanities. As a digital humanist, Stefano focuses on archival practices, with a knack for archival pedagogy and public-facing scholarship. Email address: veritas44@gmail.com

Marco Petrelli is research fellow in Anglo-American Literature at the University of Turin, and adjunct professor of Anglo-American Literature at the University of Bologna. He authored *Paradiso in nero: spazio e mito nella narrativa di Cormac McCarthy* (2020), *Nick Cave: preghiere di fuoco e ballate assassine* (2021), and a number of essays on contemporary American literature that appeared in Italian and international journals. Among his academic interests are Southern Studies, the American Gothic, African American Literature, and geocriticism. He is a literary critic for the newspaper *il manifesto*. Email address: marco.petrelli@unito.it

SECURITY AND SURVEILLANCE: LOS ANGELES POLICE AND LAND ABUSES IN PYNCHON'S *INHERENT VICE*

Antonio di Vilio
University of Trieste/ University of Udine

ABSTRACT

On the theoretical backdrop of Foucault's studies about space and Deleuze's inquiry on the society of control, this article aims at questioning the meaning of civil rights and freedom in an ultra-monitored society, within Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009). This novel provides not only a precise historical account of Los Angeles in the late Sixties, but also a reflection about police and government policies concerning the process of the reorganization of space in Los Angeles and the several public disorder episodes connected to these policies. In the form of a detective fiction, Pynchon continues the investigation on Los Angeles land abuse carried out by Mike Davis and Edward Soja's essays (such as *City of Quartz* and *Thirdspace*) on the postmodern metropolis *par excellence*. In fact, land speculation, segregation, inequality, and racial violence were just some of the rotted fruits that fell out of the ruthless government tree. On one side, Pynchon explores the relationship between federals and magnates, the urgency of making Los Angeles a theme-park paradise, the supreme utopian city, the dreaming of prosperity and flourishing that created an atmosphere of terror and paranoia. On the other side, the counterculture, hippies, groups, communities, and all those who had been segregated geographically or ideologically, tried to feed their ethnic and cultural identity against the flatland developers. Starting from this ideological battlefield, this article moves to analyze the nature of late capitalism logic consequences in the Los Angeles civil rights era within the novel, and how the countercultural utopia was doomed often on behalf of social injustice and racial restrictions.
Keywords: Thomas Pynchon; Inherent Vice; Real estate; Police; Surveillance; Paranoia.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary history, the city of Los Angeles has undergone an impressive urban and suburban development linked to a planned reorganization of spaces, and operated not only by architects and governors, but also with the massive help of the police and federals. The developers, so called by Mike Davis in his iconic essay *City of Quartz* (1990), and their financial allies, together with real-estate, oil magnates, and entertainment moguls, have been the driving force behind the public-private coalition which aimed at realizing Los Angeles's emergence as a "world city." Indeed, the seeking and forcing of the golden effect, along with the urgency of a perfect city "with the best police force in the world"—as the scoop reporter Sid Hudgens quips at the beginning of the *L.A. Confidential* film adaptation (1997)—led to a flawed and altered vision of the

city's reconfiguration, exposing a change of criteria which in spite of maintaining a social balance, also reveals a consequential redirection of the government policies. This is one of the reasons why the process of reorganization of space in Los Angeles had always been accurately planned with the collocation of surveillance centers of justice and economics in the city center, such as the Police Department, Hall of Justice, Federal Building, and Security Pacific, a contribution suggesting the extension and design of power and control. As the center of a "carceral archipelago"—a concept first used by Michel Foucault in his famous essay *Discipline and Punish* (1975)—the civic centre "was to house the administrative functions of management, the policing functions of surveillance, the economic functions of control and checking, the religious functions of encouraging obedience and work" (173). This meant that it always had the privileged role of monitoring and watching the population. Particularly, by the 1950s and early 1960s, the city of Los Angeles experienced the process of change that would turn it into the postmodern metropolis par excellence: the esthetic violence of structural operations, along with the implementation of highways, and the resulting systematic destruction of the environment, defined Los Angeles as "a city without boundaries, which ate the desert, cut down the Joshua and the May Pole, and dreamt of becoming infinite" (Davis 1990, 12). Furthermore, the phenomenon of gentrification contributed— at least theoretically—to the regeneration of urban spaces and decaying neighborhoods through capital investments supported by cultural and advertising industries. The tragic outcome of this phenomenon often led to the brutal dismantling of pre-existing and original communities, limiting their cultural diversity; more specifically, Chicanos and African Americans were spatially and socially segregated in many different ways by government policies. As inequality grew together with reconstruction, Los Angeles was ready to be set on fire. From this perspective, "with the benediction of federal lenders and full complicity of the real estate and construction industries, racially exclusive suburbanization was creating a monochromatic society from which Blacks were excluded and in which Chicanos had only a marginal place" (Davis and Wiener, 51). The Battle of Chavez Ravine, which lasted ten years from 1951, was a Chicano vain attempt to resist the gradual removal of their population from the decaying neighborhood of

Chavez Ravine, in order to build the Dodger Stadium. This was one of the several cases of racial housing discrimination, a common practice which lasted, at least officially, until the Fair Housing Act federal law was enacted in 1968. This large phenomenon strongly heightened from the 1950s and 1960s, and was well described by Mike Davis and Jon Wiener in their last historical account *Set the night on fire*: *L.A. in the Sixties* (2020), along with the other crucial clash of the civil rights era, namely the Watts Uprising of August '65. Watts involved a huge rebellion ignited by the black residents of the Watts neighborhood. The area involved was home to 80.000 of the poorest people in Los Angeles, and it had just been the epicenter of a racial explosion caused by several years of health and public housing problems, police abuses, unemployment, and ignorance by the media. During those rioting days, Watts turned "into neighborhood resistance to military occupation; followed thereafter by what can only be characterized as a vengeful reign of terror by the LAPD" (211). During the years of the Los Angeles civil rights era, several movements appeared, such as CORE, Black Muslims, Woman Strike For Peace, NOI, together with alternative media of communication, such as KPFJ radio and *The L.A. Free Press.* These years were also largely characterized by a *de facto* autonomous government and jurisdiction of the Los Angeles Police Department, strictly connected to the figure of William H. Parker who had been police chief from August 9, 1950 until his death in 1966. Parker significantly changed the face of the LAPD in a significant way—although the department was still rife with corruption. Moreover, its public image and policing methods created an all-white legion protective of its own, and prone to force and racism. Together with police enforcement, mostly illegal federal spy programmes—such as COINTELPRO were conducted in order to disrupt enemy organizations, infiltrating, and surveilling. Concerning the several racial and inequality issues affecting minorities in Los Angeles, Parker's first attitude was to refuse to admit this condition[1] and move the question of the civil rights problem in his own defense.

---

[1] At the beginning of 1960, when the US Commission on Civil Rights tried to shed some light on the police abuse of minorities in Los Angeles, Chief Parker claimed, "There is no segregation or integration problem in this community, in my opinion, and I have been here since 1922. There may be an assimilation problem, I think that is inherent. But

Accordingly, in 1960, he stated: "I think the greatest dislocated community in America today are the police . . . blamed for all of ills of humanity . . . there is no one concerned about the civil rights of the policeman" (40). While enforcing laws within the ghetto,[2] he was able to create a mythic and powerful aura around the image of the cop and of LAPD, selling it through a wide advertising campaign, thanks to the Hollywood publicity machine. Parker had a real professional publicity bureau to safeguard his public image like a T.V. star, which, indeed, he was. Chief Parker had been Jack Webb's advisor in 44 episodes of the TV Series *Dragnet*[3], that widely increased his popularity and respect in the entire nation. In fact, vetting the scripts of such a famous television program was pure propaganda: the erotization of the police was obtained through the representation of the LAPD macho ethos in movies that exalted "its icy and unnerving attitude toward the general citizenry" (42). Furthermore, I believe that this propaganda aimed at eroticizing power and supremacy, and white masculinity, in which the police tried to configure their aesthetics.

Contributing to the social and political tensions of the 60s was a foggy atmosphere of collective chaos and conspiracy theories with a double social role: on one hand, the police used this atmosphere for its own interests, often as a way to control citizens, through corruption and targeted killing programs; on the other hand, the police reacted to its fear of the community and the collective, raising Mansonoid cult paranoia and anti-communist crusades. It is clear that the *paradise on earth* concept is now purely disintegrated and unmasked right as in Nathanael West's *Day of Locust* as well as in all that noir production which "beginning in 1934, with James M. Cain's The Postman Always Rings Twice [sic], . . . repainted the image of Los Angeles as a deracinated urban hell. Writing against the myth of El Dorado, they transformed into

---

from the standpoint of integration, while there have been dislocations, this doesn't present any serious problems." (United States Government Printing Office 1960, 325).

[2] Many police academy graduates in 1959, such as Glenn Souza, "described the department as completely segregated and by any definition extremely racist . . . he was amazed at the scope of LAPD power over the Black Community" (Davis and Wiener, 46)

[3] Started as a radio show, *Dragnet* aired from 1951 to 1959, and then again for a revival during the 1960s. *Dragnet* was one of the most famous police procedural dramas in TV history.

its antithesis . . . puncturing the bloated image of Southern California as the golden land of opportunity and the fresh start" (Davis 1990, 36). What was supposed to be the L.A. endless summer, turned out to be a doomed utopia.

This brief historical introduction may be helpful to move within the multilayered setting that underlies Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009) in order to shed some light on the several dynamics of power and social conflicts affecting both the characters and the plot of this novel. In fact, it is important to understand how Pynchon focuses on the socio-political and capitalistic aspects within his work to bring out the issues previously introduced from the point of view of a writer who lived in Los Angeles in the 1960s, and who personally experienced the countercultural and civil rights era.[4] Already a central topic in the two other California novels—*The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Vineland* (1990)—Pynchon returns to the narration of Los Angeles in the late Sixties,[5] maintaining a keen eye on the new century, and setting up a redemption story, but not without a touch of nostalgia. *Inherent Vice* indeed must be necessarily seen as a critique of how capitalism and its operators—from developers to policemen—took their way toward logical extreme, leading to segregation, inequality, with the active participation of LAPD, the federals and their policies. Furthermore, it is worth considering the social and historical context in which *Inherent Vice* is written: on one hand it is published in 2009, right at the end of George W. Bush presidency, when Pynchon's perspective is not only post 1965 Watts riots but also post L.A. riots and the arrest of Rodney King in 1992.[6] On the other hand, in writing *Inherent Vice*, Pynchon continues the investigation of capitalism's social consequences, already explored within the previous novel *Against the day* (2006), particularly with the character of Darby Suckling. In addition, the choice of

---

[4] Thomas Pynchon lived in Manhattan Beach, California for much of the 1960s, where he wrote part of his most famous novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), dedicated to Richard Farina, a protest folk singer and novelist, icon of the counterculture.

[5] There would be much space for further investigation on how this representation of L.A. shifted (both in terms of ideology and narratology) within Pynchon's California Trilogy.

[6] The 1992 Los Angeles riots were a series of racially motivated episodes of violence and uprisings that occurred in the Los Angeles County in April and May 1992 when George W. Bush sent the 7th Infantry Division and the 1st Marine Division to put an end to the uprising, and when Rodney King was a victim of police abuse and brutality. During the riots, 34 people were killed.

the noir genre for this novel is arguably indicative of the author's intention of revising and representing power dynamics, often parodying a world typical of Los Angeles noir storytelling. He makes this happen with a stoned and doomed private detective he calls Doc Sportello, a lieutenant like Bjornsen who inevitably reminds him of Chief Parker and of a developer, namely Mickey Wolfmann, a real estate mogul who echoes Howard Hughes' models of capitalism and philanthropy.

While keeping this background in mind, this article aims to decode Pynchon's awareness and criticism concerning these historical and social dynamics within the complex apparatus of the novel, investigating how it presents such issues, beginning with questioning the notions of freedom and civil rights in an ultra-monitored society, on the nature of their real meanings and how they were, and still are, shaped in the name of social injustice and racial restrictions.

FREEDOM AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN *INHERENT VICE* (2009)

It is worth remembering that already in June 1966, Thomas Pynchon published an article on the New York Times—"A Journey Into The Mind of Watts"—which contained a reflection on the troubled co-existence of black and white cultures, the cops' violent approach, and the economic issues affecting some black communities in Los Angeles such as Watts. As a clear example of class and racial revolt against inequality and social discrepancy, this issue is also part of the essential background and literary material in Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009). The character of Tariq Khalil, a former member of the gang Black Guerrilla Family,[7] sets a strong example to this end. The Black Guerrilla Family is one of the several street gangs mentioned by Pynchon in the novel; it formed during the 1960s and early 1970s in Los Angeles, likely as a result of the police fury against the Black Panthers and other civil rights movements. In fact, "As even the Times recognized, the decimation of the Panthers led directly to a recrudescence of gangs in

---

[7] Black Guerrilla Family is an African-American street gang founded in 1966 by George Jackson, also mentioned in the novel, "Big Jake" Lewis, and W. L. Nolen while they were incarcerated at San Quentin prison.

the early 1970s. 'Crippin,' the most extraordinary new gang phenomenon, was a bastard offspring of the Panthers' former charisma, filling the void left by the LAPD SWAT teams" (Davis 1990, 76). These gangs intensified the revolts through guerrilla wars prompted by territorial issues and unresolved tensions. As previously discussed, land abuse and segregation were the most repeated practices used by LAPD and government to face racial matters, a process that is well described in *Inherent Vice*. In particular, Tariq Khalil expresses the fear of his community to receive the same treatment as the one given to Japanese communities during and after the WWII:

> "WW Two," said Tariq. "Before the war, a lot of South Central was still a Japanese neighborhood. Those people got sent to camps, we come on in to be the next Japs."
> "And now it's your turn to get moved along."
> "More white man's revenge. Freeway up by the airport wasn't enough.
> "Revenge for…?"
> "Watts."
> "The riots."
> "Some of us say 'insurrection.' The Man, he just waits for his moment." (IV, 17)

Tariq Khalil's choice of using the term "insurrection," and the contrast the word creates with "riots," leads to another problem concerning the interpretation of reality already disputed between the police, the government, mass media, and groups of rebellion.[8] The words used to identify these events—such as "riot," "revolt," "race riot," or "uprising"—absorb shades of meaning behind which particular ideologies lie. According to Doc, "riots" are both violent public disorders, and the disturbance of public peace, two renderings that open up the term to multiple meanings. The federal Anti-Riot Act (1968) defines "riot" as "a public disturbance involving an act or acts of violence by one

---

[8] The recent assault on Capitol Hill shed some light on the meaning of the words that have been used to   to identify these events: "attack," "march," "insurrection," "storming," were the most used by mass media and political forces, confirming the tendency to frame anti-Black racism protests as "riots" more than any other form of protest. News media also used euphemistic labels like "protests," "rallies," and "demonstrations" while describing what was happening. A recent study (Damon T. Di Cicco, 2010) examined coverage of protests in five major newspapers in the United States between 1967 and 2007, and found that during that time period, protests were depicted as a nuisance more often than the conservative ones were.

or more persons part of an assemblage of three or more persons, which act or acts shall constitute a clear and present danger of, or shall result in, damage or injury…" (18 USC, Ch. 102); "riot," whose meaning is quite oriented toward an image of mindless violence and destruction, or little morality, is also the word that was mainly used by the press and mass media at the time; in particular, the *Los Angeles Times*, used the term to identify and label the events. In opposition, the word "insurrection" implies a status that is uneasy to overturn and reverse, therefore close to "rebellion," "revolt," and "uprising" by synonym, and the terms mostly used by civil rights activists during the Sixties in Los Angeles to imply an act of morality, a manifestation of ideology, and, of course, the willingness to improve not only their personal condition, but also human rights at large According to Soja, "those who are territorially subjugated by the workings of hegemonic power have two inherent choices: either accept their imposed differentiation and division . . . or mobilize to resist . . . These choices are inherently spatial responses, individual and collective reactions" (Soja 1996, 87). It is also important to consider that Watts was not even "primarily a 'race riot,' since Mexican neighbors were for the most part left undisturbed, and . . . Despite lurid stories in the press of rioters chanting 'Kill! Kill!' there were few, if any attempts to actually murder whites, apart, perhaps, from attacks on police" (Davis and Wiener, 211). In fact, if the Watts Uprising formerly originated from a condition of segregation caused by developers markets and government policies, at a later stage, the reasons of the revolt are to be found in the military occupation of the neighborhood, and in the regime of terror enacted by the L.A.P.D. This leads to a discrepancy in the identification of violence, which the narration points out: also, the militarization of the ghetto is defined as the way in which the government exercises its statehood; its violence is never primordial, but always *functional* for implementing control over the opposing violence. "State can in this way say that violence is 'primal,' that it is simply a natural phenomenon, the responsibility for which does not lie with the State, which uses violence only against the violent, against 'criminals'—against primitives, against nomads—in order that peace may reign" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 448). As a majoritarian subject, the State, through the police, does not struggle to create a power relationship because it is already on the side

of power for being a State; this implementation of control is the condition thanks to which tolerance towards otherness becomes possible for the majoritarian subject. From this perspective, *Inherent Vice* seems to show the direct consequence of what Deleuze called "society of control:" in a society regulated by capitalistic markets, along with a de facto police regime, "control will not only have to deal with erosions of frontiers but with the explosions within shanty towns or ghettos" (Deleuze 1992, 3), where ghettos or alternative spaces inhabited by minoritarian subject become a sort of tolerance zone, as in the case of the beach, in this sensea minoritarian space, namely the only place in which the presence of minoritarian subjects—and of the alterity—is tolerated by the majoritarian culture (defined here by capitalism and control societies). Indeed, Doc not only is often told to come back to the beach by lieutenant Bigfoot, suggesting a pressing physical restriction[9] but the beach is also Doc's primordial condition. Not surprisingly, throughout the novel,[10] the word "beach" is always accompanied by the word "back." Thus, Doc's "coming back to the beach" actually shows his returning to a sphere of identity, and temporary calm and safety—at least until paranoia eventually comes up or Bigfoot appears smashing Doc's "door down like he usually does" (Pynchon 2009, 13).

This regime of terror led by the police is widely reconstructed by Thomas Pynchon in the novel, in a way that seems to be constantly questioning the role and the meaning of freedom. Through the lens of a writer in the 21st century who lived the George W. Bush era in its whole, the figure of Nixon serves as a narrative double to examine modern times restrictions of freedom. Indeed, the feeling of being deprived of one's liberty, and of living in fear during a war popularly felt as pointless or at least avoidable – Vietnam War in the novel and Iraq war in the 2000s – are conditions that belong both to the fictional novel's world and to Pynchon's world at the time the novel is written. Nixon actually makes his appearance in the novel at the Tube while Doc is watching, stating that "There are always the whiners and complainers who'll say, this is

---

[9] This spatial and ideological restriction is brilliantly represented in Paul Thomas Anderson's movie adaptation (2014); Bigfoot's claim "There's places you don't want to go, Doc—better get back to the beach" (Anderson 2013, 57), for example, evokes a sort of moral and spatial code in the film's story world that also Pynchon aimed to describe.
[10] (E.g. 154, 165, 193).

fascism. Well, fellow Americans, if it's Fascism for Freedom? I... can... dig it!" (2009, 120).
It becomes clear that Pynchon wants to underline a different and flawed idea of freedom
carried out by Richard Nixon administration, and by his forces, which of course include
Ronald Reagan, at the time governor of California: this "law and order" concept along
with another idea dear to Nixon, the one of "prosperity," resulted in the concrete status
of surveillance and freedom in the Los Angeles society in the Sixties, controlled by the
logic of developers or, more precisely, of late capitalism. Therefore, in *Inherent Vice*,
Nixon's idea of freedom eventually coincides with neoliberal interests, and so do civil
rights applications, radically opposed to the way the counterculture tried to feed its
utopian meaning of freedom. It's clear that this dream of freedom can only work within
a general capitalist logic, directly depending on its will. A crucial example of this
situation in the novel is the representation of a fake protester at a Nixon rally—Coy
Harlingen, whose wife denounces his disappearance to Doc, and a former heroin addict
who works as a spy for the government as a member of a Nixonian GOP group called
Vigilant California. This ambiguous organization is both a LAPD's civilian militia and
an arm of the Golden Fang—an enigmatic business concerning real estate, a heroin
cartel, dental clinic, evil and cure. It also represents Coy's assimilation in a world to
which he formerly did not belong to at all, and within which he assumes the shape of a
redeemed ghost. Despite refusing the proposition to preserve his work as PI and its
hippie morality, Doc is also offered to become a spy for COINTELPRO programmes.
Coy, instead, becomes a chess piece which the government eventually moves for its
purpose, as a harmless counterpart: at the Nixon rally, as he is dragged away from the
crowd by the police, Nixon humorously suggests: "Better get him to a hippie drug clinic"
(2009, 122). Once Coy appears as an agitator at the TV, the Red Squad and Public
Disorder Intelligence Division can infiltrate him in any groups: here is a parodic and
extreme case of how the government—with neo-liberal capitalist purposes feeds its
needs using an enemy of its system as an integral part of it, an example of pre-
corporation rebellion and protest. This can be seen as an early expression of a process
described by Mark Fisher in his *Capitalist Realism* (2009): Coy's assimilation is not the
"incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but

instead, their precorporation: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture" (9). Despite the fact that *Inherent Vice* brings out the tone of a utopian hope for an alternative reality to a preexistent system, Pynchon still shows, to some extent, his awareness and acceptance of an inherent vice, something that seems impossible to avoid. The historical epilogue of the Sixties experience, results in a doomed counterculture and in the end of the endless summer. Indeed, the hippie dream of an alternative system, namely a different way of life, ceases to exist from the moment in which the institutions and the police do not even consider hippies as civil persons—especially because of their reluctance towards the Vietnam war. To provide an example, when Bigfoot warns Doc Sportello, he says: "Yes, I can almost pity your civilian distress—though if you had been more of a man and less of a ball-less hippie draft dodger" (22).

POLICE PARANOIA AND ARPANET

"It increases my paranoia

Like looking at my mirror and seeing a police car"

Almost Cut My Hair, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young

The decade of endless summer finds its emotional and metaphorical peak in the Manson Murders, and, as Joan Didion states in her famous book *The White Album*, "Many people in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969" (776). In fact, the Manson Murders contribute to creating the background of the novel, and become essential to understanding the process of polarization of the forces on this field made up by the police: it is not by chance that the lieutenant Bigfoot and the LAPD are always haunted by Manson, Mansonoid conspiracies—a situation particularly emphasized in the *Inherent Vice* movie adaptation—and by "Charles Manson fantasy material" (2009, 292), so much that Doc ends up calling Bigfoot "LAPD's own Charlie Manson" (332). LAPD paranoia for conspiracies, gangism, and insurrections—along with the government logics to preserve them—made the police intolerant for any *alternativeness*

or dissent, leading to the fashioning of a unique enemy with multiple faces (African Americans, Mexicans, hippies, cults, communists[11]). Whether it is Watts riots or Manson murders, or LAPD, detective Bigfoot does not make any social or moral distinctions. Pynchon wants to enlighten the ruthless and paranoid attitude of the police, eventually represented in the novel as being extreme and ridiculous. To provide an example, Doc, Denis, Japonica, and Blatnoyd are stopped by some rookie cops, who warn them with the following statement: "New program… they' re calling it Cultwatch, every gathering of three or more civilians is now defined as a potential cult. . . . Criteria… include references to the book of Revelation, males with shoulder-length or longer hair" (179). This leads to another reflection on the omnipresence of the police in the society represented in *Inherent Vice*; indeed, the police, apart from entering the public sphere of street life, intrude in the the private sphere as well, an act that is exemplified by Bigfoot knocking down Doc's door or metaphorically reigning in his house through the TV. Bigfoot, "like many L. A. cops" (reminiscent of *Vineland*'s Hector Zuñiga, who becomes a movie producer) "harbored show-business yearnings" (Pynchon 2009, 9) and, reminding of Chief Parker or Jack Vincennes in *L.A. Confidential*, he stars in the television series *Adam-12* and makes also his appearance in the advertisement campaign for the real estate site Channel View Estates. Bigfoot strives to be macho, showing the ordinary values of police masculinity—established with the rise of Chief Parker— enough to repress his own homosexuality and hide his past relationship with his former partner Vincent Indelicato, considering the hippie era as "the erosion of masculinity values" (IV, 263). Moreover, Doc is aware of the media hurricane of police erotization triggered by the early 1960s that, as previously discussed, was a vehicle for police propaganda and for the actualization of control. In fact, he claims that "nowadays it's all you see anymore is cops, the tube is saturated with fuckin cop shows, just being regular guys, only tryin to do their job, folks, no more threat to nobody's freedom than

---

[11] In *Inherent Vice*, Pynchon exposes a peculiar homonymy, "that Charles Manson and the Vietcong are also named Charlie" (*IV*, 119). In point of fact, Charlie was a common name referred to communist forces at large, both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. It is interesting that both the obsessions of the government—communists and cults—take the same name.

some dad in a sitcom" (Pynchon 2009, 97). Police power tends to grow amorphous and omnipresent at the same time: "its power is formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states" (Benjamin 1966, 243), and, for this reason, it amplifies Doc's paranoia. In this case, however, we are not dealing with the old Pynchonesque paranoia. Here, paranoia is really part of that world inhabited by Doc, and for this reason it is much more horizontally experienced by the detective, than vertically imposed by the author; in this case, unlike *Gravity's Rainbow* or *V.*, a classic Pynchon narrative device becomes less artificial but more realistic and political, by mirroring the precise reality of those years. Paranoia in *Inherent Vice* has a specific space and time dimension: it is often drug induced—a *paranoia trip*—for what concerns countercultural characters, and it reconciles with what Pynchon calls "ordinary paranoia" (248), where "ordinary" takes on an historical and social meaning. Here the possibility that everything is connected is strictly related to the fact that events take place in the paranoia era *par excellence*—which begins probably with the shooting of Kennedy—and these connections, unlike *Gravity's Rainbow*, are concretely reflected within the *Inherent Vice* plot, where paranoia assumes a collective dimension.

Moreover, it is worth considering that precisely in that period, starting from 1969, the government and the Department of Defense began to use networks through systems such as ARPAnet to improve police surveillance and control over citizens. *Inherent Vice* presents the Internet at its very embryonic phase, a theme that Pynchon will extend in *Bleeding Edge* as a form of much larger social control. Nevertheless, also in this novel, Arpanet becomes another vehicle of paranoia, as Fritz tells Doc that Sparky, "gets on this ARPAnet trip" and he swears "it's like acid" (2009, 195). It is made clear that Arpanet belongs to that series of investments—"it's government money," says Fritz, Doc's old PI partner—made by the Department of Defense and aimed to increase surveillance in terms of speed. Fritz is afraid that the FBI is monitoring his activity online and at the end of the novel he complains about the time he has spent at the computer. In this sense, the novel offers a reflection on the use of the Internet with the awareness of a 21st century writer, but from the point of view of a late 60s and 70s character. In fact, on one hand Sparky predicts that "someday everybody's gonna wake

up to find they're under surveillance they can't escape. Skips won't be able to skip no more, maybe by then there'll be no place to skip to" (IV, 365); on the other hand, Doc wonders if the government will make the Internet illegal—like it had already done with acids—giving access to another world: Doc ignores that, for the same reason, the Internet will become the most important resource of the National Security Agency. However, as his article in *The New York Times* "Is It O.K. To Be A Luddite?" confirms, there is no nostalgia about his critique of the use of the Internet. The question that both Pynchon and Guattari seem to pose, "does not concern technological progress, but rather the use to which this progress is put" (Berressem, 443), or, again, its use as a weapon of extreme surveillance over citizens, worsening those "mechanisms of control as rigorous as the harshest confinement" (Deleuze 1995, 178). Furthermore, there is no doubt that the Internet or its prototype can be considered another real example of heterotopia within the novel. It is reasonable to think that according to Pynchon, at a certain point, the Internet could have served as a powerful tool for the counterculture to front the surveillance system. At the end of his "Postscript on Control Societies," Deleuze claims that in this society of ultrarapid forms of control, "one of the most important questions is whether trade unions still have any role: linked throughout their history to the struggle against disciplines, in sites of confinement, can they adapt, or will they give way to new forms of resistance against control societies?" (Deleuze 1995, 182). Considering the countercultural groups as an example of social trade union of the Sixties' dream—at least in terms of opposition to government policies—within *Inherent Vice*, and later with *Bleeding Edge*, Pynchon seems to refer to Deleuze's question of the possibility of creating a virtual space as a means of resistance for the counterculture, an alternative, in a neo-liberal society, ruled by the simulation of free movement. The author (once again through his protagonist Doc) seems to reflect on what the future of democracy may bring to the digital reality, believing that "it's not a question of worrying or of hoping for the best, but of finding new weapons" (Deleuze, 178). In fact, as Doc himself supposes toward the end of the novel, "Someday… there'd be phones as standard equipment in every car, maybe even dashboard computers. People could exchange

names and addresses and life stories... to remember the night they set up a *temporary commune* to help each other home through the fog" (IV, 368, emphasis mine).

REAL ESTATE AND LAND ABUSE

"Religious freedom is my immediate goal

but my long-range plan is to go into real estate."

(Donald Reilly's cartoon, *The New Yorker*, 1974, p. 46)

Real estate and land speculation appear to be the real leitmotivs of the novel, through which the corrupted world of institutions and the exploitation of Los Angeles land are investigated. In fact, Mickey Wolfmann, a ruthless real estate developer, is the character around which *Inherent Vice*'s plot revolves. Most of the characters of the novel face Mickey's disappearance after his attempted redemption, a philanthropist deed to be read in relation to Howard Hughes, a character mentioned several times in the novel; after having lived a past as ruthless estate mogul, Wolfmann had planned to build a dream city called "Arrepentimiento" (a Spanish word for "I am sorry"), with the intention of offering free homes in the desert, an inconvenient operation for his wife and for all the developers connected to him, including the mysterious Golden Fang, a huge business corporation standing for Capitalism, that apart from real estate, trades in heroin and weapons. As its name suggests, the Golden Fang, because of its connection with real estate, is "the embodiment of this vampiric exploitation of nature" (Berressem 2019, 436). While FBI and LAPD are looking for the real estate magnate, Doc finds out that Mickey Wolfmann also invested their money: "What's with this FBI interest in Mickey Wolfmann? Somebody's been playing Monopoly with federal housing money? no, couldn't be that, 'cause this is L.A., there's no such thing here. What else, then, I wonder?" (2009, 75). In fact, both the federal agents and Golden Fang share the same capitalist values and organizational structure: together they lead to a saturation of social and geographical resources, typical of capitalism logics. In addition to Pynchon's awareness of historical facts, this passage not only shows the secret dynamics between

institutions and private investors during the extreme development of urban Los Angeles, but also what the postmodern geographer Edward Soja wrote about the processes of production in Los Angeles, at least from 1930-40 decades onwards: "In the past half century, no other area has been so pumped with federal money as Los Angeles, via the Department of Defense to be sure, but also through numerous federal programmes subsidizing suburban consumption (suburbsidizing?) and the development of housing..." (Soja, 1989, 228). The novel, in fact, seems to constantly investigate the consequences of this process, focusing not only on the ecological disaster of Los Angeles, but mostly on the increase of social polarization and fragmentation, as well as spatial dispersion. Aunt Reet expresses this issue calling the Channel View Estates last Wolfmann's "assault on the environment—some chipboard horror," and she reminds Doc of the "Long, sad history of L.A. land use... Mexican families bounced out of Chavez Ravine to build Dodger Stadium, American Indians swept out of Bunker Hill for the Music Center, Tariq's neighborhood bulldozed aside for Channel View Estates" (Pynchon 2009, 17). It is immediately clear that Mickey and the federal government have cooperated for the reorganization of space in Los Angeles, continuing racially discriminatory housing policies; it is worth remembering that the California Proposition 14 of 1964, which nullified the Rumford Fair Housing Act,[12] had already increased racial inequality in the sale of houses, aiming at confining black and Mexican people to their urban ghettos. Real estate "covenants" made it illegal to sell houses in certain developments to non-white buyers (McClintock, 42). Although it was declared unconstitutional in 1966, this event only partially stopped the segregation of minorities. Moreover, after Watts Riots, with Nixon and Reagan, the process of restructuring Los Angeles—especially the suburbia—was aimed precisely at the "diffusion of minority populations" (Soja 2014, 206), implementing policies of social control in order to geographically limit potential riots. The post-Watts society in this sense represents the shift from a Foucauldian disciplinary and repressive society, to the society of control

---

[12] The Rumford Fair Housing Act was passed in 1963 by the California Legislature in order to end racial discrimination by all the owners who refused to sell or rent their properties to African American and Mexican people.

described by Deleuze and Guattari, wherein "money best expresses the difference between the two kinds of society," and where "societies no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication" (Deleuze 1995, 174). This is a lesson that Doc Sportello gets to learn at the Hall of Justice, after accidentally noticing a federal file with his name: "A federal file? on me? Wow, man! The big time!" Agent Borderline closed the folder abruptly and slid it into a pile of others on a credenza, but not before Doc saw a blurred telephoto shot of himself out in a parking lot" (Pynchon 2009, 73). As the federal investigators are watching the private investigator Doc Sportello (watching a watchman), they are actually monitoring the activities of Tariq Khalil, and "investigating Black Nationalist Hate Groups" (Pynchon 2009, 73). This way, Doc finds out to be part of a large and dense invisible web made out of monitored people. Moreover, he finds out that the real aim of the federals is to discover what happened to Mickey Wolfman and to the federal money.

As previously discussed, Pynchon distinctively insists on the narration of power dynamics, of the creation of spatial and social conflicts; these are themes that belong to all of his late novels. Above all, especially through his protagonist Doc, he is able to analyze the conflict won by capitalism to the detriment of the counterculture he experienced firsthand. In the novel, this conflict often takes the shape of a social and generational debate between minorities and majorities, namely between the "official" culture and the counterculture, while insisting on the real disruption created by capitalist policies and logics. In fact, in the world depicted in *Inherent Vice*, minorities try to create an alternative reality with respect to the "majoritarian" from which it is socially rejected: what Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze call the "minoritarian subjects" are described by the narrator as always being in contrast with flatland subjects—intended as developers and institutional members—with the exception of his former girlfriend Shasta, who undergoes a kind of capitalistic mimicry when after her affair with Mickey Wolfmann, she reappears "all in flatland gear...new package," and not in the old "faded Country Joe & The Fish t-shirt" (Pynchon 2009, 1). There is a highlighted contrast between the men of power of the flatland, and those who come from the beach, as Shasta tells Doc: "Mickey could have taught all you swingin beach bums a thing or

two" (Pynchon 2009, 305). In their confrontation with the world of power, the latter are bounced towards the beach, as if it were their only suitable place. For this reason, the beach takes on a dual role: the first being that of concrete utopia, and the second having to do with what Foucault called heterotopia, a counter-site "in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986, 24). The beach—in this case the fictional Gordita Beach that probably stands for Manhattan Beach—also represents a temporary absence of the capitalist superstructure, a break from city surveillance. It is no coincidence that Foucault indicates the beach as one of the places for "temporary relaxation" (ibid.). As Berressem suggests, the conflict within the novel involves the "heterotopia of 'the beach' and its finite ecologies on the one hand, and the infinite economies of the 'the flatlands' on the other" (8). Here, one can notice the presence of the ideology describing the contrast between Doc, who lives on the beach, and the various men of power, such as Bigfoot, Mickey Wolfmann, Crocker Fenway. In fact, Doc's confrontation with Fenway, the "Prince of Palos Verdes" (2009, 341) is symptomatic not only of a generational debate, but also of a real disruption created by capitalist policies. A *we-and-you* opposition still concerns a spatial dimension in which the unavoidable decline of the counterculture utopia lies. This opposition also represents the epilogue of the novel, in which the ideological confrontation finds its definition during the last class-warfare conversation, recalling the struggle between the "Elect" and the "Preterite" from *Gravity's Rainbow*, a central allegory of Pynchon's oeuvre, and a struggle that in *Inherent Vice* is ruled by political and social status rather than by religion. The developer Fenway states: "We're in place. We've been in place forever. Look around. Real estate, water rights, oil, cheap labor—all of that's ours, it's always been ours. And you, at the end of the day what are you? one more unit in this swarm of transients who come and go without pause here in the sunny Southland…" (IV, 347). "Being in place" and "being a transient" are opposite conditions Pynchon presents throughout the novel: from this perspective, social and class positions are to be understood in terms of displacement. On one side we have the flatland "being in place," the hegemonic category, while on the other side, "being a transient" serves as a

counter-hegemonic category created by the former in order to maintain its authority, much like a Foucauldian "heterotopia of compensation," within which the access to the California "paradise on earth" utopia is denied. In this sense, the transient category is always struggling for identity, a continuous act of becoming (or creating), against the well-established hegemonic category. In fact, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, "there is no becoming-majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian" (106).

As another textual manifestation of this type of heterotopia—and as one that can help us better explain its narrative function—the myth of Lemuria, too, is part of the allegorical imaginary Pynchon developed for the novel[13]. The lost continent of Lemuria, submerged beneath the Pacific Ocean, represents a heterotopia of compensation, a mythical dream place that existed before California's capitalistic and environmental exploitation: the embodiment of the stainless world. Lemuria is connected to the *real places* "in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (Foucault 1986, 24). Both Shasta[14] and Doc dream of it: "I dream about it, Doc. I wake up so sure sometimes. Spike feels that way, too. Maybe it's all this rain, but we're starting to have the same dreams. We can't find a way to return to Lemuria, so it's returning to us. Rising up out of the ocean" (Pynchon 2009, 167). Shasta expresses a collective feeling, the dream of a return to a land at its primordial status, where the counterculture could profess and realize its beliefs. By contrast, her expression becomes more significant in her relationship with Mickey Wolfman, an exchange that both represents and informs her experience on the side of power. Lemuria symbolizes both the past and the future of L.A., the greed and the destiny of a consumed and saturated land. Its survivors became the new residents of Los Angeles, now affected by the same greed, and the fog is part of the lost continent's

---

[13] The myth of Lemuria is mentioned throughout the novel and it also appears in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973, 564).

[14] In line with Pynchon's research of a mythical landscape, the choice of the names are also suggestive of such an interest. "Shasta" is name-connected to Mt. Shasta, long believed to be where the Lemurians came after Lemuria sunk into the sea. A common belief is also the presence of bigfoots (Bjornsen's nickname) in this area, as well as wolfmen (Mickey's surname).

heterotopic consequence. Furthermore, the sunken continent of Lemuria is both accessible to Doc through his acid trips (utopia, no-place), allowing it to stand as a physical (according to postmodern aesthetics) manifestation of a mythical past and as the hippies' hope for the possibility of its return. Both these pre-conditions represent the shades of meaning that eventually get to the "something else" (Pynchon 2009, 369) at the end of the novel, when this *something* extends its semantic field (ideologically) from utopia to heterotopia, and this is the transition in which Doc's resistance to spatial change lies (from Lemuria to Channel View Estates). Likewise, "somewhere"[15] appears 24 times throughout the novel, therefore showing its connotative meaning in all its uncertainty, mirroring the structure of the text and the way in which it spreads horizontally.

Moreover, this "something else" is sharply opposed to the "fog" or the "smog" that pervades the narration at Doc's own expense. In fact, it is worth claiming that there is an absence of awareness and deep understanding of the events on Doc's part. From the beginning of the novel, Doc is "doomed" both as detective, and as a minoritarian subject. From this perspective, the fog (signified in all of its representations), is a disruptive and disorienting agent that dominates him from the collective chaos of the era, to the lost continent's heterotopic effect upon reality. Also, as the narrator places Doc in a position of weakness, he makes him incapable of understanding history. "In symbolic terms, degrees of visibility correspond to degrees of conscious knowledge" (Chicosz 2017, 8). In this regard, the awareness of the narrator doesn't fit with Doc's, revealing an incongruence that is telling of the novel's narrative progression. While for the most part of the novel ideology can be traced back to Pynchon's experience in the counterculture and to his criticism in "Journey into the minds of Watts," the postmodern narrative tools of irony and allegory are used by Pynchon to split the narrator's voice from that of his characters'. However, in this case, postmodern allegory

---

[15] It would be also interesting to investigate how this "somewhere" often occurs for Doc in relation to Shasta and to their past relationship, as it emerges from the beginning of Chapter 11: "I wish you could see these waves. It's one more of these places a voice from *somewhere* else tells you you have to be" (IV, 163, italics mine).

is always mediated by a noir realism, meeting the needs of the narrative of a realist capitalism. The narrator's awareness of ironically displaying a poetics of uncertainty, again, helps to create an overall condition of displacement and confusion, which is also exemplified by the detective's state of alienation, a theme already investigated by the hard-boiled writers and detectives. In this regard, the deep intertextuality of the text along with the amount of references to the Californian noir imaginary proves to be particularly significant: by echoing novels such as *The Long Goodbye* and *Farewell, My Lovely*, and not only for the locations he resorts to, Pynchon recalls the Chandlerian fragmentation of the individual beneath the intricate puzzle of the narration.

Ultimately, once again displacement seems to be a central theme of American noir. It provides evidence for readers to explain the centrality of real estate in many noir novels and movies. In fact, this feature is not only an example of land abuse and exploitation, but it is also a fertile ground for power dynamics analysis. Examples of such investigations are James M. Cain's *Mildred Pierce* (1941) and its 1945 film adaptation; Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) for what concerns the public transportation system, and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) by Robert Zemeckis. In a similar way, the representation of police brutality and corruption, characterizing the Chandler's novels, are now represented almost as a parody, by showing its most extreme logic, which is also the logic of capitalism as Pynchon writes in the novel, "Everything in this dream of prerevolution was in fact *doomed* to end and the faithless money-driven world to reassert its control over all the lives" (Pynchon 2009, 130, italics mine). Keeping a strong sense of history in mind, this statement reveals the inherent vice of Western culture, without renouncing the pursuit of utopia to escape the "gathering fog" of late capitalism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Paul Thomas. 2013. *Inherent Vice* (screenplay). Burbank, California: Warner Bros. Ent.

Benjamin, Walter. 1966. *Selected Writings.* Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press.

Berressem, Hanjo. 2019. "Economies of Greed in 'late Pynchon:' America and the Logic of Capital." *Textual Practice* 33 (3):433-449.

Cain, James M. 1941. *Mildred Pierce*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Maria Cichosz. 2017. "Postmodern Allegory and 1960s Melancholy in Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58 (5):521-537.

Davis, Mike and Wiener Jon. 2020. *Set The Night On Fire*. London and New York: Verso.

Davis, Mike. 1992. *City of Quartz*. New York: Vintage books.

_____. 2014. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles And The Imagination Of Disaster*. New York: Metropolitan Books. Kindle Edition.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. "Postscript on the Societies of Control" *October* 59, pp. 3–7.

_____. 1995. *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Di Cicco, DT. 2010. "The Public Nuisance Paradigm: Changes in Mass Media Coverage of Political Protest since the 1960s." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 87 (1):135-153.

Didion, Joan. 2019. *Joan Didion*: *The 1960 & 70s*. New York: Library of America.

Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books.

Foucault, Michael and Miskowiec, J. 1986. "Of Other Spaces". *Diacritics* 16, (1): 22-27.

Foucault, Michael. 1995. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage books.

_____. 1994. *Eterotopia*. Milano: Mimesis.

McClintock, S. and Miller, J. 2019. "West Coast," in *Thomas Pynchon in Context*, edited by Dalsgaard, I. H, 39-46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Literature in Context).

McLaughlin, R. 2004. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *Symplokē* 12 (1-2):53-68.

Liner, J. 2016. "Utopia and Debt in Postmodernity; or, Time Management in Inherent Vice." *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon* 4 (1):1–63.

Pynchon, Thomas. 1966. "A Journey Into The Mind Of Watts." *New York Times*, June 12.

_____. 1972. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: Bantam.

_____. 1973. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: The Viking Press,

_____. 1984. "Is It O.K. To Be A Luddite?". *New York Times*, October 28. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchon-luddite.html?

_____. 1990. *Vineland*. Boston Toronto London: Little, Brown & Company.

_____. 1995. *V.*. London: Vintage.

_____. 2006. *Against the Day*. London: Jonathan Cape.

_____. 2009. *Inherent Vice*. New York: The Penguin Press.

_____. 2013. *Bleeding Edge*. New York: Penguin Press.

Soja, Edward W. 2014. *My Los Angeles: From Urban Restructuring to Regional Urbanization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

_____. 1989. "Taking Los Angeles apart" in *Postmodern Geography*. London and New York: Verso.

_____. 1996. *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Blackwell Pub.

West, Nathanael. 1939. *The Day of the Locust*. New York: Penguin Random House.

FILMOGRAPHY

Anderson, Paul Thomas. 2014. *Inherent Vice*. USA: Ghoulardi Film Company, Warner Bros., IAC Films.

Curtiz, Michael. 1945. *Mildred Pierce*. USA: Warner Bros.

Hanson, Curtis. 1997. *L.A. Confidential*. USA: Warner Bros.

Polanski, Roman. 1974. *Chinatown*. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Zemeckis, Robert. 1988. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*. USA: Touchstone Pictures.

Antonio Di Vilio |

Antonio Di Vilio is a Ph.D. student in American Literature at the University of Udine/ University of Trieste. His research interests focus on California literature and culture, noir, narratology, Cold war narratives, film text and American folk music. He published articles and reviews on authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Steve Erickson, Paul Thomas Anderson and Jeff Tweedy. In 2019 he earned a Master's Degree *summa cum laude* in European and American Languages and Literatures at the University of Naples "L'Orientale". He is also a member of AISNA and EAAS. E-mail: antoniodivilio95@gmail.com

THE POST-9/11 SECURITY STATE: SURVEILLING AMERICAN ARABS AND MUSLIMS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Andrea Carosso
University of Torino

ABSTRACT

A "silent minority" until the end of the 20th century, Arab and Muslim Americans became, literally overnight, a "problem" ethnic group in the US consensus after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when on the one hand Islamophobia was adopted as the leading trope of national grievance, while on the other hand a massive surveillance apparatus was put in place in order to ostensibly address the risk of internal radicalization, resulting in visible loss of civil rights for Arab and Muslim minorities in the US. This paper explores the deployment of the US security state against America Arabs and Muslims after 9/11, and sets it within the complex history of Middle Eastern and South Asian immigration to the US in the 20th century.
Keywords: Arab American; Surveillance; 9/11; Islamophobia; Civil rights.

TWENTY YEARS ON

As I write this, in the late summer of 2021, it has been twenty years since a man named Ziad Jarrah was pulled over by a Maryland State Trooper, a few miles from the Delaware state line, in the early hours of September 9, 2001. After a routine license and registration check, the man received a 270 dollar fine for speeding over the 65mph limit, and was left to continue his journey to an unknown destination. Two days later, September 11, 2001, Jarrah, a Lebanese national, participated in the hijacking of United Airlines flight 93, one of four planes taken by a group of 19 Middle Eastern terrorists in a coordinated sequence of terrorist acts that went down in history as "the 9/11 attacks." UA 93 was the only plane that did not make it to its final target—supposedly the White House or the US Capitol—as it crashed en route onto a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing all 44 people on board. The 9/11 Commission Report placed Jarrah as the pilot of the hijacked plane (9/11 Report, 21-25).

In the annals of 9/11, Jarrah's failed apprehension during that traffic stop twenty years ago became symptomatic of everything that went wrong with the attacks. He and his Al-Qaeda associates had entered the US legally on student, tourist or business visas, their identities, motives and whereabouts for the most part unknown to the authorities.

Therefore, the reasoning went, the attacks that had brought America to its knees had been first and foremost the result of a colossal failure of national security, which US administrations, in bipartisan agreement, set out to redress in the years and decades that followed.

THE BACKLASH, AT HOME AND ABROAD

America responded to the attacks of 9/11 by waging some of the longest wars in its history. Some of these grabbed media headlines in the years and decades to come, especially those in Afghanistan and Iraq. Others drew less attention, but were by no means less consequential: Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Syria, Niger are only some of many places where the US conducted antiterrorism operations after 9/11. In 2017–18 alone, just to quote recent data, the US had active military operations—all terrorism related—in 80 countries around the world (Savell 2019). But foreign wars and military operations were just one aspect of the gigantic security state built to respond to America's returning obsession with national security after the end of the Cold War. In the years following the attacks, the US also went on to assemble, institutionalize, and maintain an unprecedented architecture of mass surveillance meant to correct the alleged security failures of 9/11. By no means benign, this escalation of a surveillance society—closely associated with the coeval emergence of so-called "surveillance capitalism" (more on this later)—presided over the erosion of civil liberties not only outside but also inside the US. At home, this meant the institution of a completely new paradigm for understanding the relations between the state and its subjects, especially for certain groups of people, most notably minority groups of Middle Eastern origin.

In his recent *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump* (2021), Spencer Ackerman has pointed out that what came to be dubbed as "the war on terror" of the early 21st century produced a remarkable backlash on the individual and group liberties of Arab and Muslim minorities in the US, which have included "indefinite detention without charge . . . law-enforcement infiltration of communities, businesses, and even houses of worship to generate informants; expansive categories of criminal association, but only for certain people . . . secret prisons, torture"

(Ackerman 2021, 15). Alongside the social costs, came the unprecedented economic cost of the War on Terror, which has been estimated, according to an analysis by the Costs of War project at Brown University released this fall, to a staggering $8 trillion, $1.1 billion of which has been spent on preventing terrorism at home (Brown.edu 2021).

The years that followed the 9/11 attacks saw a particularly harsh overhaul of immigration policies in the US, in ways that the famed "land of immigrants" suddenly came to view foreigners as a national security threat. The fact that the 9/11 attacks had been perpetrated by aliens who had legally entered the country immediately translated into a sense that terrorism was the result of loose immigration policies. Law enforcement, which until that point had been directed mostly at Latino and African American minorities, was repurposed to target American Arabs and Muslims, two groups virtually unknown to most Americans prior to 2001. The sudden heightening of scrutiny for these communities, as well as repeated incidents targeting their communities across the country, turned Arabs and Muslims in America, in the words of Moustafa Bayoumi, to "the new blacks," two groups now holding "the dubious distinction" of being a "problem" in American society in the new century (Bayoumi 2008, 2-3).

At home, the War on Terror particularly affected communities of Middle Eastern and South Asian origin, whose participation to civic life became particularly problematic within the security state and its pervasive surveillance apparatus that explicitly targeted them as the new communities of suspicion after the attacks. After the communist spy of the Cold-War-era-lore, the trope of the Islamic terrorist came to conjure up images of endangered national security, and was quickly extended to include *all* Muslim—or Muslim looking—individuals, in a guilt by association mood that would dominate the national psyche for years to come. That mood targeted individuals of Arab origin and/or Muslim faith, notwithstanding obvious differences between these two groups—nuances that western publics chose to ignore in the frenzy of the backlash.[1]

---

[1] In this paper, I alternate references between "Arabs" and "Muslims," as a shorthand to include two groups that in reality only partially overlap. These groups have been treated in an indistinct continuum in much of the post-9/11

Andrea Carosso |

Only nine days after the 9/11 attacks, as president George W.B. Bush delivered his "Why Do They Hate Us?" speech to Congress, a "clash of civilizations" rhetoric took center stage in the national discourse: "Americans are asking—Bush said in that speech—, 'Why do they hate us?'" Answering: "They hate our freedoms—our freedoms of religion, our freedoms of speech, our freedoms to vote, and assemble, and disagree with each other" (President Bush Addresses the Nation 2001). In Bush's presumption of American innocence as opposed to enemy's guilt, "they" was a generically worded marker to identify an adversary at large that went well beyond Al-Qaeda, the material perpetrators of the attacks. "They" very quickly expanded, by association, to all, or most, Arabs and Muslims, both outside and *inside* the US. In the months and years following the attacks, an industry of Islamophobes—which included people from all walks of life—sprung into a constant, high-intensity demonization of Arabs and Muslims, leading many in America to blame 9/11 on Islam itself (Salam 2021).

"MODEL MINORITY" TO "PROBLEM MINORITY"

I argue that, by the end of the Cold War, there was fertile ground in the US for an all–out ideological attack on Islam. The history of Middle Eastern minorities in the US is one of constant oscillation between assimilation within the white majority and rejection from it. The early Arab migrants that came to America, mostly from present day Lebanon, in the late 19th century were placed in a racial limbo that made participation in civic life highly contested. Neither white nor black—the only racial categories for which naturalization was admissible in the early 20th century—Arabs were seen as belonging to those "other" or "in-between" ancestries, like the Japanese, Chinese, and American Natives, who were excluded from citizenship by law. For Arabs, this meant being placed in a vast gray area where citizenship was granted or denied based on

---

debate. More precisely, scholarship has oscillated in focus between the two, not for lack of subtlety, but possibly because of the changing nature of the debate over the last 20 years. In the first decade after 9/11, scholarship focused mostly on the backlash on Arabs and Arab American communities (whose majority are of Christian, not Muslim, ancestry). Over the last ten years, however, also due to the increase of the Muslim population in the US, the debate has focused mostly on American Muslims.

discretionary decisions of the courts, which adopted "shifting standards of whiteness" on a case-by-case basis (Bayoumi 2015, 49). John Tehranian and others have argued that the racial status of Middle Easterners in the US has always been determined by a process of "selective racialization," a "complex hermeneutics of whiteness" according to which assessments on their "racial performance" always prevailed over the application of pseudoscientific categories of race as such (Tehranian 2009, 39). Middle Easterners in America were naturalized based on their willingness to assimilate with the rest of society, i.e. their readiness to submit to a "racial dramaturgy," choreographed by the white majority (Tehranian 2009, 184). For Arabs, most of whom were Christian, this entailed emphasizing any Christian ancestry while erasing their oriental features, so as to appear as members of a "model minority" within the American melting pot. They often westernized their looks and, if Muslim, gave up religious practices and other elements of their culture alienating them from the assimilationist melting pot: in other words, they enacted a "strategic covering" of their Middle Eastern identity, eager to show potential for assimilation within mainstream (i.e. white) American culture—a textbook case of racial passing.

The "model minority" paradigm entered a crisis in the second half of the twentieth century, when the resurgence of Arab nationalisms, especially in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, drove Arabs in the US, especially younger ones, to identity politics and pan-ethnic activism in response to the one-sided, blatantly pro-Israeli attitude of US politicians and media in that conflict. Arab-American associations (such as the Arab-American University Graduates and the Organization of Arab Students) openly protested Israeli policies in the Middle East and raised public attention to the Palestinian question. As a result, people of Middle Eastern descent suddenly became the target of discourses and policies of exclusion from the American consensus, questioning the tenability of the white, assimilationist paradigm. Starting in the 1970s, the FBI and the CIA placed Arab American communities under enhanced surveillance and debates emerged on the assimilability of Muslims to the American Way of Life. The Iranian revolution of 1979 was a turning point: this is when Islam in America became—in the words of Edward Said—synonymous with "bearded clerics and mad

suicidal bombers . . . unrelenting Iranian mullahs, fanatical fundamentalists, and kidnappers, remorseless turbaned crowds who chant hatred of the US, 'the great devil,' and all its ways" (Said 1988, 47).

In the 1990s, as more and more Muslim immigrants arrived in the US form the Arab world and South Asia, the Clinton administration authorized law enforcement agencies to arrest without evidence and deport "also on the basis of secret evidence" aliens from eight Middle Eastern countries suspected of "abetting terrorism" (Kundnani 2014, 45). Concurrently, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 introduced the doctrine of the "material support statute," which became the basis of prosecution of Arab and Muslim Americans "for expressing an 'ideology.'" It also allowed government evidence "to be heard in secret detention hearings and trials"— thus effectively removing the rights of defendants to challenge the prosecution (Kundnani 2014, 47). These policies translated into practice notions of cultural essentialism that historians such as Bernard Lewis ("The Roots of Muslim Rage," 1990) and Samuel Huntington ("The Clash of Civilizations?" 1993) had been promoting since the end of the Cold War: that the West and Islam were in fact incompatible, because stemming from opposite and irreconcilable world views.

An iteration of specific modes of marginalization of minorities that has marked key moments in US history—from slavery and racial segregation since the Reconstruction era, to anti-Semitism, to the backlash on Asian immigrants in the 20th century and the recent criminalization of Latino migrants—this pattern of "assigning derogatory meaning to particular bodies distinguished by ethnicity, nationality, biology, or geography" is known as *racialization* (Alsultany 2008, 208). Postulated on the assumption that all Arabs are Muslims and Islam is a cruel, backward, and uncivilized religion, this form of cultural essentialism—also known as "culturalist Islamophobia"— has resulted in what Nadine Naber has referred to as a "racialization of religion" (Naber 2000, 53), i.e. the assumption that, by virtue of an inner, fixed cultural essence, Muslims are potentially violent.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND THE DEPLOYMENT OF THE SECURITY STATE

9/11 was the perfect catalyst to escalate a latent American Islamophobia (Carosso 2018, 13-14) to a whole different level. As G.W. Bush proceeded to declare the War on Terror as nothing short of a religious war, a "crusade" against "evil" (his own words), its obvious yet never clearly defined enemy became an unspecified number of Muslims around the world. At home this resulted in the social construction of the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern as terrorist, in a transitive logic postulating each Arab and Muslim as a potential threat to national security. Commentators, and not limited to those on the right, pathologized Arabs and Muslims, whose critiques of America were proof of their conspiratorial thinking, and turned them, in the eyes of some Americans, into dangerous outsiders no longer qualified for the American Dream. Within days of 9/11, the right-wing radio host Dennis Prager told the Fox News host Bill O'Reilly: "It is very sad to say, but a significant percentage of the Muslim world hates us." Before September ended, O'Reilly suggested, "I think we should put troops on the border right now" (cited in Ackerman 2021, 20). A whole ethnic group had turned, in the eyes of many, into a mass of co-conspirators.

One of the defining books of the first decade of the 21st century, Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), clearly captures that new sentiment. Returning from a business trip overseas a few days after the attacks, the novel's protagonists, a Muslim and Pakistani national with a Princeton degree and a prestigious job at a top Wall Street firm, experiences first-hand the nation's "growing and self-righteous rage" after the attacks, the sudden emergence of its Islamophobic obsession:

> At the airport, I was escorted by armed guards into a room where I was made to strip down to my boxer shorts . . . and I was, as a consequence, the last person to board our aircraft. My entrance elicited looks of concern from many of my fellow passengers. I flew to New York uncomfortable in my own face: I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty. . . . When we arrived, I was separated from my team at immigration. They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners. The officer who inspected my passport was a solidly built woman with a pistol at her hip and a mastery of English inferior to mine; I attempted to disarm her with a smile. "What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?" she asked me. "I live here," I replied. "That is not what I asked you, sir," she said. "What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?" Our

exchange continued in much this fashion for several minutes. In the end I was dispatched for a secondary inspection in a room where I sat on a metal bench next to a tattooed man in handcuffs. (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 74)

After September 11th, the national consensus embraced the profiling of Muslims in the name of the security state. Hate crimes against Muslims—or those, like Sikhs, *perceived* to be Muslims—skyrocketed. By January 2002, four months after the attacks, CAIR, the Council on American–Islamic Relations, an advocacy group established in the 1990s to challenge stereotypes of Islam and Muslims in the US, said that it had received 1,658 reports of discrimination, profiling, harassment, and physical assaults against persons appearing Arab or Muslim, a threefold increase over the prior year (Cole 2005, 47). A USA Today/Gallup poll from 2006 showed that 39 percent of Americans admitted to holding prejudice against Muslims and believed that all Muslims, US citizens included, should carry Special IDs (Grewal 2014, 8).

Congress, the FBI, the NSA (National Security Agency), and other governmental agencies were quick to act on those biases. Non-naturalized immigrants provided the ideal targets: as aliens, they could claim little constitutional protection. On October 25th 2001, six weeks after the attacks, the USA P.A.T.R.I.O.T. Act was promulgated,[2] granting law enforcement sweeping authorities to detain noncitizens without charge for up to a week (and, in certain cases, indefinitely). In an effort to tighten US national security, it weakened legal safeguards against unreasonable searches and seizures,and brought forth what Giorgio Agamben has defined, after Carl Schmitt, a "state of exception" from constitutionally guaranteed protections.

Domestic law enforcement responses to the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon operated on different levels: after initial impromptu measures, mostly relying on tips from "concerned citizens," and revolving around the questionable figure of the "suspicious immigrant" (Shiek 2011, 11-12), the US government relied both on stepped up

---

[2] An acronym for "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism" the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 had the stated goal of dramatically tightening US national security, particularly relative to foreign terrorism.

(and often illegal) technology-based measures of data mining, as well as concerted efforts to infiltrate ethnic neighborhoods and community spaces. The newly instituted Department of Homeland Security was placed in charge of domestic anti-terrorism. Its key role was—as the name suggested—securing the national (now "the Homeland") borders. Consolidating domestic security functions and immigration enforcement (through the creation of its ICE—Immigration and Customs Enforcement—division, which replaced the Immigration and Naturalization Services—INS—and removed it from the control of the Department of Justice), the DHS underlined that national security was first and foremost dependent on strict policing of immigration.

The DHS delivered some of the most infamous mass surveillance initiatives of the post 9/11 era. In September 2002, it enacted a Special Registration program, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), mandating men aged sixteen to sixty-four from twenty-five majority-Muslim countries (except one, North Korea), who were present in the US or planning to enter on nonimmigrant visas, to be interviewed under oath, fingerprinted, and photographed by a federal official. Of the 80,000 individuals from majority Muslim countries believed to pose a "risk to national security" who underwent special registration, over thirteen thousand faced deportation as a consequence of registration, mostly over minor visa violations, resulting in the largest mass deportation in American history (Alsultany 2012, 5; Bayoumi 2015, 85).

Arab and Muslim businesses and charities became targets of ICE, the FBI, and Justice Department investigations and raids. ICE in particular sought out undocumented immigrants: in 2005 alone it raided thirteen hundred businesses; the next year, it tripled its pace to forty-four hundred and began a years-long, nationwide roundup of illegal immigrants, Operation Return to Sender, which arrested twenty-three thousand people, most of whom had no previous criminal record. (Ackerman 2021, 90) Likewise, the US Justice Department detained tens of thousands of Muslim, South Asian, and Middle Eastern men, through various initiatives. At least a thousand were jailed without charge; tens of thousands US citizens of Arab and Muslim ancestry were questioned by the FBI, and hundreds of thousands were placed under surveillance.

As of 2004, at least 100,000 Arabs and Muslims living in the United States had personally experienced one of the various post-9/11 state security measures, including arbitrary arrests, secret and indefinite detentions, prolonged detention as "material witnesses," closed hearings, the production of secret evidence, government eavesdropping on attorney-client conversations, FBI home and work visits, wiretapping, seizures of property, removals for technical visa violations, and mandatory special registration. Women wearing head scarves were especially at risk of harassment and discrimination. After 9/11, the hijab was taken to signify that its wearer was, in the words of Arun Kundnani, "sympathetic to the enemy, presumptively disloyal, and forever foreign." Women faced discrimination in employment and violence on the streets, often involving attempts to pull off their head scarves. According to a post-9/11 study of young, college-educated Arab-American Muslim women in Chicago, "all of those interviewed had been the victims of physical or verbal abuse, or knew someone close to them who had been" (Kundnani 2014, 61).

Extensive measures of surveillance and racial profiling of American Muslims and Arabs (in airports, in the workplace, in the media) were deployed, spawning among these communities "a state of uncertainty and peril more common to refugees living on the borders of war zones and global migrants without documents" (Cainkar 2009, 3). In some urban centers, up to 25% percent of Muslims and Arabs in the US began to consider leaving the country (Cainkar 2009, 117), as depression and fear over the hostile atmosphere surrounding them led many to isolate themselves, stopping to attend mosques and community events (Alsultany 2012, 5), in a blatant erosion of their constitutional right of association. Fearful of being targeted by the US government, Pakistani Muslims in particular "voluntarily" returned to their country of origin by the thousands (ibid.).

As the FBI established, in the ten years following 9/11, a network of fifteen thousand informants, operating in mosques, infiltrating businesses and communities, the NSA proceeded to create special programs to spy on ordinary people in the US and abroad. While relying on the one hand on the post-9/11 state of exception, these programs also relied on the emergence of what Shoshana Zuboff has defined, in her

seminal book bearing the same name, as "surveillance capitalism," i.e. a constellation of ever larger and more influential internet corporations whose core business lay in the commodification of personal data for the purpose of profit making. These surveillance programs, long hidden from the American public, relied on almost unrestricted access to the infrastructure and metadata owned by the surveillance capitalism corporations. One among the first, STELLARWIND, launched in October 2001, consisted of a warrantless data mining operation of the communications of American citizens, including e-mails, telephone conversations, financial transactions, and internet activity. Even larger in scope was another program, code-named PRISM, launched in 2007, in which the NSA targeted, without any court warrants, "any customers of participating firms [which included Microsoft, Apple, Facebook, Google, YouTube, and Skype, among others] who live outside the US, or those Americans whose communications include people outside the US" (Greenvald and MacAskill 2013).

These programs remained secret for long periods of time, with the consequence that the public was unable to ascertain whether any legal safeguards were being implemented around them. *The New York Times* lifted the veil on STELLARWIND four years after its launch, which meant that the program had been free to operate away from public scrutiny for 48 months. Five years went by before a disaffected NSA contractor, Edward Snowden, revealed the hidden complicity between state security agencies and the tech companies: the public learned of the existence of PRISM and, with it, the fact that the US was in fact controlling a large portion of the world's communication stream—including those of many public officials (Fidler and Ganguly 2015, 97). The primary targets of these programs were Arabs and Muslims, among whom the government was seeking out the so-called "homegrown enemies," i.e. radicalized domestic terrorists who became the focus of sprawling counterterrorism structures of policing and surveillance in the United States and across Europe.

Other surveillance measures were less high tech, yet no less pervasive. The US government's "countering violent extremism" (CVE) program, launched in major US cities beginning in 2011, mobilized community leaders and social service providers as proxy national security agents (Nguyen 2019, 30). A case in point was the DHS campaign

"If you see something, say something," which tried to enroll Arabs and Muslims in a sweeping surveillance program of their own communities. It had been the belief of the Obama administration, which designed CVE as a replacement for NSEERS, that communities were are best placed to recognize and confront the threat of terrorism. According to Nicole Nguyen's assessment in *Suspect Communities: Anti-Muslim Racism and the Domestic War on Terror*, an in-depth study of the program, CVE sought to use minority community members "as key national security operatives tasked with countering terrorist propaganda as well as identifying, reporting, and working with individuals perceived to be at risk of or in the process of radicalizing" (Nguyen 2019, 2).

CONCLUSION

This late summer of 2021, as the media marks the 20th anniversary of 9/11, the American disorderly retreat from Afghanistan has reminded the world that 9/11 is not yet relegated to the history books, and its effects are with us to this day. Arabs and Muslims in America remain, to borrow a phrase from a recent book, "outsiders at home," within a context that is ever quick to instrumentalize them for political purposes, when the very negative attitudes of western publics are recurrently reignited, especially coinciding with election cycles. During the 2007 US presidential primaries, major media outlets (including Fox News) uncritically circulated a story according to which Barack Obama was a Muslim who had attend a Madrasa as a child. Leading up to the 2010 elections, the so-called "Victory Mosque" campaign dominated the discourse of Republican politicians, who tried to paint the desire of moderate Muslims to build a house of worship in lower Manhattan, not far from Ground Zero, as an act of support for Al-Qaeda's attack. In his presidential campaign of 2015-16, Donald Trump capitalized on America's Islamophobia when he repeatedly called for a "Muslim ban," a "total and complete shutdown" of Muslims entering the United States. Within two weeks of Donald Trump's election, civil rights groups and news organizations reported a surge of crimes on Muslims, with many perpetrators invoking the name of the incoming

president.[3] These are only some of the most prominent cases of the political exploitation of Islamophobia in America.

According to Abdulkader H. Sinno, and other commentators, the reason Republican politicians and right-wing media have extensively used attacks on Arabs and Muslims is that "they knew from long-existing studies that voters tend to vote more for Republicans when concerned about matters of security and threat" (Sinno 2012, 217). Although two US Muslims women now sit in the US Congress and the post-9/11 decades have "birthed a generation determined to define their place in American life on their own terms" (Dias 2021), the perception of the Middle Eastern as a problem within the American melting pot still persists. In her recent *Outsiders at Home: The Politics of American Islamophobia*, Nazita Lajevardi makes the point that, in spite of the growing chronological distance from 9/11, hostility towards has grown especially acute since 2016, and today American Arabs and Muslims face "rampant discrimination," while being "deprived of fair treatment in the sociopolitical context and are acutely aware of their worsening situation in the American political arena" (Lajevardi 2020, 192-93).

In 2020, two Muslim American organizations that work on issues of surveillance submitted a paper to the Human Rights Council of the United Nations denouncing that "surveilling Muslim and other communities of color has resulted in a wide range of consequences including chilling free speech rights, disrupting community cohesion, and criminalizing the community in ways that have led to detention or worse." The paper positions surveillance as "part of a larger infrastructure in the War on Terror" and laments "*the continued* use of surveillance by various institutions—local and national— in the United States" (United Nations Universal Periodic Review of United States of America 2020). Muslim American organizations have taken issue with the expansion of grant monies from the DHS to local communities willing to collect information about US citizens that might shed light on any suspicious activity or potentially reveal domestic terrorist plots. Programs such as the DHS' Targeted Violence & Terrorism

---

[3] See Lichtblau (2016); Miller and Werner-Winslow (2016); Dana, Karam et al. (2018).

Prevention (TVTP) Grant Program end up, claim activists, impacting Muslims and Blacks as their primary targets (Khan and Ramachandran 2021), while operating under the "false and unconstitutional premise: that Muslim religious belief and practices are a basis for law enforcement scrutiny" (American Civil Liberties Union 2021). Often cited as proof of the inherent danger, and ultimate uselessness, of these programs is the fact that surveillance of Arab and Muslim communities have never produced any significant security breakthroughs: according to the NYPD's own admission, for example, a 15 year-program of mapping and surveilling Muslims in New York City resulted in zero leads related to terrorism.

In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff has argued that it was exactly the "exceptionalism" of the War on Terror era that offered the necessary institutional protection for surveillance capitalism to take root and flourish. It was under the auspices of the post-9/11 exceptional legislation that, according to Zuboff, the US government's attention shifted "from privacy legislation to an urgent interest in the rapidly developing skills and technologies of Google and other rising surveillance capitalists" (Zuboff 2019, 340). In the post-9/11 years, governments—the US government in particular—protected the unregulated expansion of the massive data mining that regulates our lives today in the belief that this would produce benefits for the security state. Those benefits never really materialized, but surveillance capitalism is more pervasive than ever.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ackerman, Spencer. 2021. *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump*. New York: Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC.

American Civil Liberties Union. 2021. "Factsheet: The NYPD Muslim Surveillance Program." https://www.aclu.org/other/factsheet-nypd-muslim-surveillance-program. (Accessed November 18, 2021).

Agamben, Giorgio. 2003. *Stato di eccezione. Homo Sacer, II.I*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Alsultany, Evelyn. 2008. "The Prime-Time Plight of the Arab Muslim American after 9/11. Configurations of Race and Nation in TV Dramas." In *Race and Arab Americans*

Before and After 9/11. From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects, edited by Amaney A. Jamal and Nadine Christine Naber, 204-228. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Bayoumi, Moustafa. 2008. *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*. New York: Penguin Press.

_____. 2015. *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror*. New York: New York University Press.

Brown.edu. 2021. "Costs of the 20-year war on terror: $8 trillion and 900,000 deaths." September 1. https://www.brown.edu/news/2021-09-01/costsofwar. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Cainkar, Louise. 2009. *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Carosso, Andrea. 2018. "L'altro razzializzato. Arabi e Musulmani negli Stati Uniti prima e dopo l'11 Settembre." *Ácoma - Rivista Internazionale di Studi Americani* 14:3–20.

Cole, David. 2005. *Enemy Aliens: Double Standards and Constitutional Freedoms in the War on Terrorism*. New York: The New Press.

Dana, Karam, and et al. 2018. "Veiled Politics: Experiences with Discrimination among Muslim Americans." *Politics and Religion* 12 (4):629–77.

Dias, Elizabeth. 2021. "Muslim Americans' 'Seismic Change.'" *The New York Times*, September 12. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/08/us/9-11-american-muslims.html (Accessed November 16, 2021).

Fidler, David P., and Sumit Ganguly (eds.). 2015. *The Snowden Reader*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

GhaneaBassiri, Kambiz. 2010. *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Greenvald, Glen, and MacAskill, Ewen. 2013."NSA Prism program taps in to user data of Apple, Google and others." *The Guardian*, June 7. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/us-tech-giants-nsa-data (accessed November 17, 2021).

Grewal, Zareena. 2014. *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*. Nation of Newcomers: Immigrant History as American History. New York: New York University Press.

Hamid, Mohsin. 2008. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. London: Penguin.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1993. "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3):22–49.

Khan, Saher and Ramachandran, Vignesh. 2021. "Post-9/11 surveillance has left a generation of Muslim Americans in a shadow of distrust and fear." PBS Newshour, September 16. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/post-9-11-surveillance-has-left-a-generation-of-muslim-americans-in-a-shadow-of-distrust-and-fear. (Accessed November 12, 2021).

Kloeckner, Christian, Simone Knewitz, Sabine Sielke, and Universität Bonn (eds.). 2013. *Beyond 9/11: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Twenty-First Century U.S. American Culture*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften.

Kundnani, Arun. 2014. *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*. London: Verso.

Lajevardi, Nazita. 2020. *Outsiders at Home: The Politics of American Islamophobia*. Cambridge (UK)-New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, Bernard. 1990. "The Roots of Muslim Rage." *The Atlantic*, Sept.: 47–60.

Lichtblau, Eric. 2016. "U.S. Hate Crimes Surge 6%, Fueled by Attacks on Muslims." *The New York Times*, November 16. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/15/us/politics/fbi-hate-crimes-muslims.html (Accessed November 16, 2021).

Miller, Cassie and Werner-Winslow, Alexandra. 2019. "Ten Days After: Harassment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election." SPLC. November 29. https://www.splcenter.org/20161129/ten-days-after-harassment-and-intimidation-aftermath-election. (Accessed November 12, 2021).

Naber, Nadine. 2000. "Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (1):37–61.

Nguyen, Nicole. 2019. *Suspect Communities: Anti-Muslim Racism and the Domestic War on Terror*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The Washington Post Company. 2001. "President Bush Addresses the Nation." *The Washington Post*, September 20. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html. (Accessed November 18, 2021).

Said, Edward. 1988. "Identity, Negation and Violence." *New Left Review* 1 (171):46–60.

Salam, Erum. 2021. "'Muslims Were so Demonized:' Mehdi Hasan, Zainab Johnson, Keith Ellison and More on 9/11's Aftermath." *The Guardian*, September 10.https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/sep/09/muslim-americans-september-11-keith-ellison-zainab-johnson-mehdi-hasan.

Savell, Stephanie. 2019. "Mapping the American War on Terror: Now in 80 Countries." Countercurrents.org, February 22. https://countercurrents.org/2019/02/mapping-the-

american-war-on-terror-now-in-80-countries-it-couldnt-be-more-global/. (Accessed November 16, 2021).

Shiekh, Irum. 2011. *Detained Without Cause: Muslims' Stories of Detention and Deportation in*

America After 9/11. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sinno, Abdulkader H. 2012. "The Politics of Western Muslims." *Review of Middle East Studies* 46 (2):216–31.

SPLC. 2016. "Harassment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election."

Tehranian, John. 2009. *Whitewashed: America's Invisible Middle Eastern Minority*. New York: New York University Press.

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United State. 2013. *The 9/11 Report: The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

United Nations Universal Periodic Review of United States of America. 2020. "Surveillance of Muslim Communities Post 9/11." Second Cycle. Thirty-Sixth Session of the UPR Human Rights Council.

Zuboff, Shoshana. 2018. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Andrea Carosso is Professor of American Literature and Culture at the Department of International Languages and Literatures at the University of Torino, where he is director of the post-graduate program in English and American Studies and co-delegate for studies abroad. He is former director of the "Piero Bairati" Center for American Studies at the University of Torino. His latest (coedited) book is *Family in Crisis? Crossing Borders, Crossing Narratives* (Transcript, 2020). He is the author of *Cold War Narratives. American Culture in the 1950s* (2012), *Urban Cultures in the United States* (2010), *Invito alla lettura di Vladimir Nabokov* (1999), *T.S. Eliot e i miti del moderno. Prassi, teoria e ideologia negli scritti critici e filosofici* (1995) and has edited, among other volumes, *Decostruzione e\è America. Un reader critico* (1994) and, more recently, co-edited publications on family discourses. His current research focuses on representations of the backlash on ethnic (especially Arab and Muslim) communities in the US after 9/11, family and reproductive policies in early Cold War America, and the transatlantic circulation of the blues. Forthcoming is a book-length study on the US South-West. Email: andrea.carosso@unito.it

BEYOND 'BAD' COPS: HISTORICIZING AND RESISTING SURVEILLANCE CULTURE IN UNIVERSITIES

Lindsey Albracht, Amy J. Wan
Queens College and The Graduate Center, City University of New York

ABSTRACT

In this article, we define and examine surveillance culture within US college classrooms, a logical extension of pervasive carceral and capitalist logics that underlie the US educational system, in which individual success is tied to behavior monitoring, rule following, and sorting, particularly within marginalized student populations. Reflecting anxieties about the expansion of educational access, we argue for how crisis and change have historically contributed to the urgency and opportunity to expand surveillance culture and consider why this has continued to happen as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. We offer suggestions and alternatives to surveillance culture that have helped us foster student engagement in our own classrooms while also arguing for more substantial structural changes that could challenge surveillance culture beyond the individual unit of the classroom.
Keywords: Pedagogy; Surveillance; Online teaching; Plagiarism, Cheating.

Since March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic caused a turn to virtual learning, stories have proliferated reporting a substantial rise in student cheating among college students. Students are reportedly forming GroupMe chats to share quiz and test answers (Loeb 2021), and increasingly purchasing essays from essay mills (Weale 2021). They are portrayed as seeking out "quick" answers on homework help sites (Lancaster and Cotarlan 2021), and hiring professionals to pose as them in online courses (Chen 2020). They are even admitting to cheating due to what they perceive as a "diminished" quality of learning online (Sellers 2021).

As writing specialists, and in our professional capacities as a Writing Program Administrator (Amy J. Wan) and a former digital pedagogy specialist at a Center for Teaching and Learning (Lindsey Albracht) at the City University of New York (CUNY), the public university system in New York City, we had commonly responded to faculty concerns raised by stories like this well before the pandemic began: we empathize with faculty, who often feel individually responsible for preventing cheating and plagiarism; we recognize that cheating and plagiarism happen, and that it might be happening more in this unprecedented moment. However, while these stories are not new, they are often

used to sell both expensive surveillance technology "solutions" to institutions, and to cement strict, zero-tolerance policies and procedures designed, on their face, to "preserve" academic integrity. We argue that responses like these are not only commonly ineffective, but that they also exacerbate surveillance culture.

Surveillance culture is part of the pervasive carceral and capitalist logics that underlie the US education system. These logics are reflected in both subtle and overt ways on many US college campuses. The presence of a pervasive school-to-prison pipeline in the US (Heitzeg 2009; NAACP 2005), is likely to disproportionately impact marginalized student populations—such as those at a public-serving, access-oriented, majority-minority, urban institution like CUNY—before they arrive at college. This means that the close monitoring of behavior, the naturalization of rule following and sorting, policies which come with overly punitive consequences, and an automatic assumption of criminality or bad intentions from people in positions of authority are part of what many of our students come to expect from school before they even set foot on our campus. However, there are also more direct ties between US universities and the US system of mass incarceration and policing. For example, while close to 70% of US campuses have their own "campus safety," or security employees tasked with providing law enforcement services, public college campuses are more than twice as likely as private college campuses to use the services of "sworn police officers," who possess state power to arrest, and whose jurisdictions tend to reach into the surrounding community (Reaves 2015). Divestment campaigns at a variety of prestigious private US institutions has also recently drawn attention to how many universities include stocks for private prison corporations, such as the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and the GEO Group, within their investment portfolios (Watson 2016). State-funded public schools and colleges are commonly required to purchase furniture and supplies from incarcerated workers whose rate of pay averages between fourteen cents to $1.41 per hour (Sawyer 2017). These kinds of university-supported carceral ties help to directly and indirectly grow the criminal punishment system while increasing and reinforcing both the literal and metaphorical policing that students receive in earlier moments of their education.

Amidst forced rapid decisions, uncertainty, and dependence on educational technology and virtual classroom spaces, as happened in the early chaotic days of the pandemic, surveillance culture commonly intensifies and becomes increasingly naturalized. In this article, we consider how moments of institutional change and crisis have historically made colleges more vulnerable to enacting surveillance-enabled "solutions" that do not necessarily prevent cheating or promote effective pedagogy, but that do position students and faculty as adversaries, and make surveillance culture seem logical, inevitable, and even equitable. Whether through the collection and monetization of student data, or through increasingly sophisticated surveillance policies and technologies, these "solutions" have commonly conveyed suspicion of students and positioned students and faculty as adversaries for decades. Untangling these narratives positions us to more impactfully resist surveillance culture in moments of future crisis, and also to understand its alternatives.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHEATING AND PLAGIARISM RESEARCH
It is helpful to understand our contemporary shift toward surveillance culture through considering how researchers and universities have historically framed the problem of academic dishonesty, shifting the focus from institutions and faculty to the behavior of the individual student during moments of acute change or crisis. While it is beyond the scope of this article to comprehensively outline all of the research on cheating and plagiarism in the US, understanding this shift and how it impacted imagined solutions and interventions can provide a new way of contextualizing pandemic-induced plagiarism and cheating narratives.

Before the early 1960s, research on cheating and plagiarism concerning higher education was relatively sparse. However, in the few studies that do exist, it was routinely acknowledged that students' decisions to cheat or plagiarize were complex. Some researchers more forcefully blamed bad course design, assignment design, or incompetent instructors (Hawkins 1932; Whitsel 1954), noting how and why instructors should treat accusations of plagiarism as carefully as possible (Kuhn 1957). One researcher gave two other reasons aside from instructor incompetence: a lack of trust

between a student and an instructor, and fear of the impact of one, high-stakes examination in the determination of an entire course grade. She suggests working on building trust, and designing more low-stakes assignments as methods of preventing cheating in the future (Gillentine 1937). In a student survey issued by the *Phi Delta Kappan*, students blamed themselves, finding that the fear of not passing, a strong desire to please parents and to participate in grade-based activities, and laziness are the most common reasons why cheating and plagiarism occur (Carter 1928).

Many proposed solutions to combatting or discouraging academic dishonesty feel surprisingly contemporary and progressive. Writing from City College of New York in 1959, English professor Leo Hamalian suggests that plagiarism resulted from a lack of appropriate resources and the prevalence of increasingly overcrowded classrooms, which made students feel detached from the value of their work. He suggests taking a far more relaxed approach to paper deadlines while building trust with students who seem resistant to learning. In the *Phi Delta Kappan* survey, students suggested that cheating policies and punishments should be openly discussed and democratically decided upon by members of the class or by elected student government officials, since student-to-student disapproval of cheating would be its most impactful deterrent (Carter 1928). Other solutions included implementing policies like honor pledges (Doyle and Foote 1925), or even suspending traditional exams until we can take a more comprehensive approach to studying how and why cheating happens (Wrightsman 1959).

While there were several local studies of plagiarism and cheating on campuses, it wasn't until William Bowers conducted the first multi-institutional survey of 5,000 students from across almost 100 US-based institutions that we had a more comprehensive picture. Half of students who were surveyed admitted to engaging in some form of academic dishonesty since coming to college: findings that were relatively consistent with a number of local campus studies (1964, 193). The study also found that students overwhelmingly both disapproved of cheating and also engaged in it, finding it simultaneously "morally wrong" and irresistible (194).

The latter half of the twentieth century brought a number of important cultural and demographic shifts to US college campuses. The Cold War era youth culture figure of the "bad boy" challenged conformity and institutionalism in new ways (Medovoi 2005), creating new opportunities to understand cheating as subversive and "cool" rather than as shameful. Meanwhile, post-war increases in federal funding for higher education and advances of the Civil Rights movement produced "dramatic growth" in college access (Kim and Rury 2007). During this era, research on cheating and plagiarism remained similarly multifaceted. However, it also significantly *accelerated*, despite very little empirical evidence that the problem was getting worse beyond the perception of change. Suggestions for penalties also grew more comprehensive, and in many cases, more severe. This was also despite evidence from the same era which suggested that more severe penalties do not necessarily decrease the prevalence of academic dishonesty (Salem & Bowers 1970).

While it is too tidy and too inaccurate to suggest that all pre-1960s researchers blamed factors other than students compared to post-1960s researchers who primarily blamed students for cheating and plagiarism, it is noticeable that blame for academic dishonesty increasingly shifted to the way that a "culture" of cheating develops on campuses through students who enable it in the latter half of the 20th century (Bowers 1968). Research increasingly predicted which personality types or students who shared particular demographic features were more likely to plagiarize if the situation allowed for it (Hetherington and Felman 1964; Steininger et. al. 1964). Students were also assumed to be increasingly "cynical" (Daniels 1960), disillusioned, and disinterested countercultural acolytes, rejecting what was commonly framed as the university's tradition of intellectual honesty and, therefore, increasingly likely to cheat (Stavisky 1973; Trachtenberg 1972). There was an interest in exposing the practices of essay mills (Stravisky 1973; "Term Paper Companies and the Constitution," 1974; Trachtenberg 1972), advocating for faculty to solicit more reference texts from students to compare styles, to give more weight to final exams and oral presentations than to papers, and to require all essay writing to happen in class more frequently in order to combat these

problems. In 1960, UCLA officially adopted a policy to dismiss students accused of plagiarism from the university (American Association of University Professors).

The shift in blame from a lack of institutional resources, inadequate faculty development, and inadequate assignment design to perceived student motivations, personalities, and "predispositions" toward complying with university rules and standards has commonly resulted in a difference in solutions. It mirrors an intertwined capitalist emphasis on an individual's behavior as the reason for success or failure, and also a carceral emphasis on efficient, covert, and monodirectional detection and punishment. When we imagine ourselves to be supporting students who are momentarily disengaged in their learning, afraid of consequences, new to the kind of academic work that we are asking them to do, or who lack sufficient agency, *and* when we have adequate institutional support to treat students as individual people, solutions tend to be more nuanced and focused on teaching and learning. When we imagine our role is to "catch" and penalize students who are doing something wrong because of their lack of moral character, their lack of respect for academic work or for academic institutions, or when we patronizingly try to "protect" students from their own worst impulses, likening cheating to crime becomes more common, and solutions become both more individualistic and more punishment-oriented.

SURVEILLANCE CULTURE IN THE SHIFT TO COMPUTER MEDIATED AND ONLINE LEARNING

The shift toward online learning and other forms of computer-mediated instruction in the mid-1990s reignited anxieties about academic dishonesty that bore some similarities to the ones which surfaced after the mid-century. While distance education through the mail, radio, and television had persisted since at least the 18th century (Kentnor 2015), learning online and learning in person but with the assistance of computers was a new terrain to navigate. However, it wasn't the late 1990s and into the early 2000s that the price of computers and the more widespread availability of internet access made online learning a possibility for a much wider range of students. Likewise, it wasn't until then

that a perceived need for technologies that perform a surveillance function entered into the equation.

Tracing the development of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) like Illias, Dokeos, eCollege, Moodle, and eventually Blackboard can be a helpful way to understand how the growth of surveillance culture has become normalized and pervasive in moments of change and educational democratization. The specific ways that these LMS technologies have continued to develop reflects some troubling assumptions about students, their perceived deficiencies, and the "need" to monitor and control them.

In *Pedagogy and Practice: A Multi-modal Approach for a Multi-ethnic Online Classroom*, Mary-Lynn Chambers documents the initial development and marketing of LMSs to universities, noting that because the interest in computer-assisted learning still primarily came from predominantly white and wealthy schools where students had access to expensive technologies, this meant that the majority of LMSs were initially "designed by whites, implemented by whites for a predominately white audience, and promoted by whites" (2016, 37). Yet, as the popularity of online learning grew, so did the surveillance capabilities of LMS products. Platforms that were initially dedicated to storing material and facilitating collaboration—or even to providing a free or low-cost open-source option based on the pedagogical theories of social constructivism like Moodle (38)—began to develop more sophisticated ways to track and report student behavior. This was due in part to the fact that advances in computing technology made the tracking of student engagement through learning analytics more possible. However, it was inevitably also because offering surveillance options seemed necessary if an LMS desired to compete within a marketplace of increasingly sophisticated platforms claiming to track student "outcomes" for the purpose of improving them.

Today, LMSs capture a wide variety of data on student (and faculty) behaviors, often without the consent or knowledge of students and faculty who use them. Ann Hill Duin and Jason Tham call attention to instructors' common use of LMSs without knowing about their surveillance capabilities. They describe the pervasive amount of data collection that "includes the compilation and sharing of aggregate data across all

courses and institutions as a means to better understand learning and improve student success" (2020, 16). As Estee Beck describes, "Blackboard and Canvas, two commonly used learning management systems within many universities, use data analytics to track student engagement, including the amount of time logged into their systems and clicks across modules" (2016). In many cases, data like this is only available to faculty, not students, and in fact, students often do not know that faculty have access to this information as part of the class. If an instructor uses an LMS, opting out of this data collection is not an option, as these agreements are made between educational technology companies and the institution.

For some faculty, the predictive analytics available to them via an LMS might seem like more "benign" surveillance, or even a helpful way to keep students on track with their own work. However, analytics like these can also miss a more complex picture. They can equate something that is as complicated as academic engagement with time that a student has a browser window open and not idle on their device, and can encourage an antagonistic relationship to develop between students and professors built on impartial information. Faculty must also recognize that these surveillance capabilities can easily be used to assess *their* own efficacy in the classroom by the larger institution. For example, Blackboard, one of the most popular LMSs on the market today, claims to measure which faculty are the most "innovative," the instructional design practices that lead to "improved student performance," and as a result, which students are the most "at-risk" of earning a low grade or withdrawing from a course ("Blackboard Analytics for Learn"). Metrics like these could be used to support students who are struggling as easily as they could be used to sanction faculty whose "low performing" students are indicative of their own "poor" performance. If faculty believe that the data that Blackboard collects does not necessarily tell an accurate story about what happens in our classroom or why a student is failing to engage with content that we assign—if we would not want to be monitored in these ways without our consent or knowledge—we should not be doing this to our students.

The link between predictive analytics that are meant to track and report the potential for certain kinds of student or faculty behavior are also concerning both for

the ties that these tools have to policing, crime, and punishment, and also for what we know about the way that algorithmic models teach themselves based on the collection of previous data. In the book *Weapons of Math Destruction*, Cathy O'Neil argues for how predictive tools like PredPoll CompStat, and HunchLab—tools used by the criminal punishment system to analyze historic crime data in neighborhoods in order to predict the likelihood of future crime—focus disproportionately on communities with poor, racialized residents. The result, argues O'Neil, is that "police departments... zero in on the poor, stopping more of them, arresting a portion of those, and sending a subgroup to prison" (2016, 91). The areas where it seems that it is more likely for crime to occur are the areas where crime is *already* overly documented, even though the vast majority of what the tools predict are the possibility of "nuisance crimes," or non-violent offenses like panhandling and selling or possessing small quantities of drugs (86). O'Neil argues that these "digital dragnets" are just as likely to predict and continue to single out crimes of poverty as the broken windows and zero-tolerance policies that preceded them (104).

With this in mind, it is useful to consider not only what predictive analytics are likely to detect, but also whether surveillance advancements like this would have been made in the first place had the demand for LMS technologies not expanded. The use of the platform by students who are more frequently figured in deficit narratives as more likely to "struggle," or to lack aptitude or motivation for schoolwork, has undoubtedly increased an appetite for these features. While we are not arguing that there are no students who are more likely to struggle, or that some students show less enthusiasm for their coursework, predictively anticipating which students will fail shares the potential to disproportionately identify students who are struggling for the wrong reasons. This can create the false narrative that students are failing *because* of a fairly simplistic lack of motivation or will: because they are too lazy to do the readings, and not because predictive analytics are identifying students who experiencing a greater lack of access to things that support their basic needs, like housing, food, healthcare and mental healthcare services. In individual, classroom-level cases, this might lead to bad assumptions and inappropriate interventions. Building relationships with students

can reveal a much more complex picture of how and why they are struggling in a class than what we can glean from looking at a spreadsheet that reveals how much time they spent looking at a video.

Surveillance technologies also rhetorically position students as liabilities to the university's academic integrity— potential liars or cheaters who need to be rescued from their own worst impulses—a story we have been telling about students ever since a greater number of non-white, female, international, working-class, and poor students have joined our campuses. These technologies put administrators and educators in the position of law enforcement officers entrusted with ensuring the validity of the degree that students earn. They can also quantify an extraordinarily complex process—like innovative, supportive, caring, culturally responsive, community-engaged teaching and instructional design—in crude, simplistic, and patronizing waysm tying faculty efficacy to students' course grades and to superficial metrics of engagement.

Still, our choice to use or avoid a certain LMS or particular features that it contains might not be fully within our control, and these platforms *do* provide critical affordances. So, while it might not be possible to opt completely out of the surveillance functions that they perform, writing studies scholars like Duin, Tham and Beck argue for the necessity of making these surveillance capabilities visible so students can begin to recognize the various ways their information is tracked and stored: not just by LMSs but also other technologies like phones and search engines. Such approaches put the instructor in the position of collaborating with students to address surveillance technologies, rather than deploying them in service of seeking out students to track, manage, or punish. On this matter, faculty who are in less vulnerable employment positions should demand to know the way that their own behaviors are tracked within these platforms as well, and to advocate for transparency on behalf of untenured, contingent, and graduate student faculty.

PLAGIARISM DETECTION SOFTWARE AND SURVEILLANCE CULTURE
Use of technologies that claim to help faculty to detect plagiarism has also been a pervasive and persistent way that universities have monitored students' behavior for at

least two decades. Platforms such as TurnItIn operate by collecting a continuously-expanding archive of student and professional writing onto a database, and then comparing that writing to the new writing that students submit for their classes. As Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel (2017) have detailed, this means that when students upload their work, it ceases to belong to them, and becomes a way for the for-profit tool to expand its own efficacy.

Depending on university preferences, sometimes individual students are allowed to consent to "opt out" of the collection of their paper. However, in these cases, universities can also create a local version of the database, storing student work that comes only from within a single institutional context. Either way, it is the university's decision to set the preferences for students, and students cannot opt out entirely, nor do they have the permission to delete their paper from the database after the semester ends ("Top 15 Misconceptions"). The bottom line is that this product is continuously strengthened by the addition of work that students do not necessarily consent to share, and that students themselves cannot remove.

In 2007, Susan E. Schorn, a writing coordinator at the University of Texas at Austin, found that a simple Google search (or, in other words, copying and pasting language that seemed incongruous with the rest of a student's text into Google) detected plagiarism at a much more accurate rate than either TurnItIn or Safe Assign. A follow-up test in 2015 showed similarly high false positive and false negative plagiarism rates. While these tools are commonly referred to as "plagiarism detection software," they do not necessarily *detect* plagiarism, but simply flag papers for their similarities.

Schorn's presentation at the 2016 Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference further pointed to the double standard that "academic integrity" policies create in universities. As Schorn noted, ghostwriters in university communication offices regularly write speeches and official communications on behalf of college administrators. Faculty commonly use model syllabi, assignment prompts, or other teaching materials without attribution. Even college plagiarism policies—the language

that many professors are required to copy and paste directly into their own syllabi—are, ironically, commonly plagiarized.

Other research within our field has suggested that software designed to curb or detect plagiarism is not only largely ineffective, but it can also have other negative impacts, such as "overemphasiz[ing] attention to surface issues" (Vie 2013), oversimplifying or confusing the meaning of plagiarism (Mott-Smith 2017, Price 2002, Howard 2001), and monetizing student data for corporate profit without the consent of students themselves (Morris and Stommel 2017). These tools not only do not work but they also treat student writing as a product for corporate consumption. They devalue student writing, separating students from their agency and universities from money that could be used to support students (and their instructors) rather than to monitor them. At CUNY, Luke Waltzer, Lisa M. Rhody, and Roxanne Shirazi testified to the CUNY Board of Trustees in December 2020 against the impending contract approval for almost 2 million dollars for Turnitin, citing its ineffectiveness as plagiarism detection and questioning its cost in the context of budget cuts that have reduced the hiring of those who actually teach writing at the university.

And while surveillance tools like Turnitin and SafeAssign give the illusion of teaching writing practices like research, citation use and academic integrity, they often only show students how to address the particular systems that are monitoring their writing for "originality." Lesson plans center around how to avoid plagiarism by focusing on the lengths of quotations, rather than understanding how to integrate sources into the argument of an essay, or understanding why conventions and rules exist in the first place. Sometimes teachers require students to run their essays through surveillance tools before handing it in for a grade in order for students to see the percentage of their paper that is deemed "original." The attention on students' potential to plagiarize or cheat, thus creating a need to surveil students in the process, is not only misdirected, but it also impacts the efficacy of our teaching and the quality of relationships between instructors and students. The deployment of these technologies shifts students' focus away from understanding, valuing, critiquing, and even altering existing citation and

knowledge-production practices to suit their own rhetorical purposes and goals, and toward complying with opaque rules that carry high-stakes consequences.

SURVEILLANCE POLICIES

While plagiarism software and LMSs provide prominent examples of teachers trying to prevent a small number of students from cheating by subjecting a wide number of students to surveillance and to the non-consensual theft of their work as a result, our everyday teaching practices can also create pervasive opportunities for surveillance. It is not only the use of expensive and inaccurately deployed technological surveillance "solutions" to what may or may not be a media-manufactured cheating "epidemic" that concerns us as faculty educators. It is also the proliferation of what Jeffrey Moro has called "cop shit," defined as "any pedagogical technique or technology that presumes an adversarial relationship between students and teachers" (2020). For Moro, "cop shit" includes practices like unforgiving deadlines and absence policies, which contribute to a culture in which a teacher is spending more energy on making sure students are not engaging in "wrongdoing" rather than learning.

We find the presence of "cop shit" in our own classrooms constantly and, as individual people who are part of large systems that we do not control, we have to make difficult decisions about how to meaningfully eliminate it while giving students enough structure to remain on track. A lack of dedicated and ongoing time and space to professionally develop and to encounter alternatives makes it easy to do unto students what was done unto us. However, confronting our own "cop shit" commonly comes with a sense of relief. Less often than in the past, we find ourselves in the position to make impossible, arbitrary judgment calls that do not align with the rest of our pedagogical philosophy. For instance, Amy J. Wan had a long-standing policy of decreasing paper grades by a third for each day it was late, and was spending an extraordinary amount of time and emotional labor fielding students' reasons for late papers and determining which "excuses" were legitimate, not to mention keeping track of the late penalties and their impact. The policy was always there, passed down to her when she was a graduate instructor and it stuck, unnoticed, until she spent some time a few years ago trying to

make her syllabus policies friendlier, more inviting, and adhering the principles of universal design. That late paper policy actually surprised her, hiding in plain sight but then revealed with this different framework about how the structure of the class communicates a particular set of values and attitudes to students.

Lindsey Albracht also inherited policy language and practices as a graduate student instructor that seemed logical or inevitable when she first began to implement them, but that were really just "cop shit" on further inspection. One policy instructed students about the harsh penalties that they would face for perpetually checking their cell phones, claiming that seeing or hearing a student's phone would be grounds for asking them to leave the class. Another policy refused late papers outside of "extreme" circumstances, noting that even "most illnesses and computer problems do not constitute an 'extreme' circumstance," a position that Lindsey never really found tenable or necessary, but felt initially obligated to uphold because of warnings that students would take advantage of her if she seemed more flexible.

Both Wan and Albracht now not only do not have late penalties: they advertise this fact to students, telling them that deadlines are in place to help them with their own time management, but that a meeting after a deadline has passed to make a new set of deadlines is always possible. Not only do students mostly continue to turn in work at the same rate that they did in the past (most are on time, some are a little late, and some work never comes), but students who were behind for very legitimate reasons are now more likely to feel that it is possible to catch up. However, for both Amy and Lindsey, it was not until they encountered colleagues' more generous policies (and had the time to reflect on those policies) that they felt motivated and empowered to change the language initially copied and pasted from syllabi provided by a department or program: syllabi which communicated, tacitly and explicitly, the department's own expectations on its instructors.

Unfortunately, changing policy language alone will not disrupt surveillance culture without a commitment to helping faculty develop meaningful alternatives that feel authentic to their pedagogical values. In examples from our own institution, the City University of New York (CUNY), is classified by the United States Department of

Education as a non-attendance taking institution. While institutions within our system interpret the meaning of this classification differently, the Academic Policies and Procedures document for Queens College (where we both teach) states that "absence in and of itself shall not affect a students' grade." However, professors make choices about how to implement (or to "get around") this policy that are commonly embedded in a variety of ingrained assumptions about students that can greatly limit imagination and agency.

When we hire and train new instructors, or when we teach mid-career faculty about translating their face-to-face course into an online format, this policy is one that gets questioned most often. Many teachers cannot conceive of being in charge of a class in which we are not keeping track of which students are present, and then penalizing those who do not attend. Instructors often fixate on how we can continue to ensure students' presence in our classrooms, rather than on how we can find ways to increase student engagement in our classes that can happen with or without students' physical presence. Thus, the common practice of tying students' grades to "participation" becomes a solution to teaching in a non-attendance taking institution. Counting up how many times a student spoke, or wrote something in a forum, becomes a proxy for "engagement." The practice of requiring a certain number of low-stakes activities that students must be present to complete persists, too. The effect is that students attend classes where there is a grade-based attendance policy in defiance of the stated rule. And practices like this render our non-traditional policy indistinguishable from traditional ones, and rely on systems of rewards and punishments to do work that should be far more pedagogically complex.

During distance learning, an additional CUNY policy stated that we could not require students to use their cameras during synchronous class times or for the purposes of proctoring exams. There were many sensible reasons for this policy in response to our particular student body. In New York City apartments, where a majority of our students live in multigenerational households where they share their learning spaces, it is common for students to learn online in spaces where other people are present, including children. Parents must give consent for minor children to appear on screen,

and this is not something that we can consistently guarantee. We also have students who live in a variety of congregate living situations (including shelters) or who need to access their classes in other public places and may not have felt comfortable to advertise this to their peers or their professors. We've had students take synchronous online courses from their car while parked in a parking lot where they could access high-speed internet when this wasn't a possibility at home, or "tune in" to class during a last-minute work shift, or attend class while caring for young children or siblings.

The impulse to "get around" this policy, or to disregard it entirely, was real and understandable. Having and emphasizing a rule that says that students are not required to use their cameras has meant and continues to mean that we must sometimes teach in Zoom rooms full of a sea of black boxes where we are unable to see our students' faces and monitor their physical presence in the classroom. While we both recognize why requiring cameras can participate in surveillance culture in ways that were not pedagogically feasible, we share the sense that it can be difficult, lonely, and joyless to teach to the boxes. However, rather than deferring to surveillance, we have been challenged to build community and participation in other ways such as collaborating with students to use tools like Padlet, Google Docs, Slack, Jamboard, MentiMeter and Hypothes.is. The black boxes have encouraged us to make creative new uses of the Zoom chat or polling feature, to play games, to develop a class shorthand with a variety of reaction buttons and emojis, and to lighten up the chat with gifs and memes. Amy has had students video or audio record their essays to share with the class, and invited others in the class to respond, which almost every student has done. Lindsey sets aside class time in the first several weeks near the beginning of the semester to facilitate get-to-know-you synchronous chats and other activities where students are encouraged (though never required) to share pictures of our pets and houseplants, pictures of things we have been cooking or eating, places we love in Queens, what we are watching, the places that we miss from campus, and songs that we are listening to as we write.

We have found that strategies like recasting engagement, and realizing when engagement is possible (during class, or after class in asynchronous writing tasks) means that we hear from more students than we would in a more traditional class

discussion. Many times during class, students do not have their cameras on, but are writing their responses to one another in other spaces. Yet we recognize that this has required a mindshift in many ways. We have to resist feeling resentful about the silence, and create different, new, and similarly meaningful ways to invite students to engage in the class without surveilling them. These new ways of engagement do not *replace* the kind of face-to-face engagement that we are used to. However, they open new possibilities for engagement that would not have been possible with cameras: possibilities that have ultimately made both of us better teachers.

Curbing our own attachments to surveillance culture is difficult and vulnerable work. It can be hard to hear what students are trying to communicate to us about their lives and the conditions under which they are trying to successfully do school when they cheat, when they do not attend classes, or when our efforts to engage them fail. Sometimes, it is impossible to know whether students are telling us that their lives are complicated, or that they do not find value in the task that they are completing and that we tried to thoughtfully design. They might be telling us about something that is completely out of our control: that our class size is too big, that the resources that are provided to enable their academic success are insufficient, or that a required class doesn't feel that relevant to their life, despite our best efforts. Sometimes they are telling us that most of college feels like completing an arbitrary, endless series of disconnected tasks for unclear and uncertain rewards in a rapidly changing world. Students might be communicating that they do not understand something—or even that they are *indifferent* to understanding it—and because we are professors, what we are teaching is likely to be something that has brought great personal meaning to our own lives. Students might be telling us something about the trauma they have experienced in school, and their fear of more failure. They might be telling us something about our efficacy, our identity, or their disagreement with our deepest pedagogical beliefs.

We can acknowledge these difficulties and the pain and uncertainty that they can bring. However, we must also acknowledge that we will not impactfully address *any* of these concerns by monitoring and punishing students more: by communicating that we do not trust them, and that we expect that they will try to trick us, or that we are

their adversaries. Surveillance culture only makes it more difficult to build relationships based on trust and care, which are essential for the kind of deep learning that we want all of our students to do.

MOVING FORWARD WITHIN ENTRENCHED SYSTEMS OF SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance culture has yielded "solutions" to the real or imagined increase in academic dishonesty that often fails to function in the way that many professors and administrators intend. We encourage educators to consider how their own practices—such as how they handle attendance, late papers, technology policies, and policies designed to encourage engagement or participation, how they deploy surveillance technologies, and how they teach students about the collection of their data—might participate in or resist surveillance culture. However, we must also make space to consider the larger structural conditions under which such surveillance-oriented practices feel necessary and entrenched. Sanctioning an individual instructor's rigid policy or practice without considering the entire system in which that practice was incubated can carry the suggestion that systemic transformation involves a process of rooting out the "bad apples," rather than rooting out what's harmful within the system itself: what incubates and feeds surveillance culture, and what makes it feel natural and inevitable.

Departmentally-mandated grading distributions, unjust labor conditions, a job market that went from bad to catastrophic during a global pandemic, austerity, and administrative pressures to "return to normal" under conditions which remain unsafe can further entrench the desire to use surveillance culture to solve problems. Paired with stock language on syllabi, the models that we all had as students, and a severe lack of institutional investment in faculty development opportunities it can become almost inevitable that we will use surveillance with students in the same ways it was used with us. Additionally, since approximately 50-75% of the faculty in the United States are contingent faculty members (Betensky, Kahn, Maisto, and Schaffer 2021), all or most pedagogical work that's beyond teaching from model materials and prior experiences becomes labor that vulnerable faculty are giving to the institution for free.

Rather than using moments of crisis to further exacerbate surveillance culture, we can co-create classroom spaces where most of their students simply voluntarily appear, even in required classes. For example, we can design policies and practices that honor students' humanity and privacy while also challenging them; we can resist surveillance technologies, or help students to use and understand them more thoughtfully, and examine our inherited materials; we can remember how moments of crisis can make surveillance seem logical, inevitable, and even the most sensible option, and know that it is particularly important to resist plagiarism panics in these moments of change. We should do these things with compassion toward individual people, and with an acknowledgement that actions happen within systems that individuals do not necessarily create, control, or transform alone. Ultimately, these individual actions must be paired with adequate ongoing professional development support, fair wages for our contingent peers, solid student support services, and ongoing political education. When faculty are adequately supported and challenged to consider how "automatic" practices in their pedagogy might reflect values that they might not actually share, or communicate with students in ways that they might not actually intend, the space for other possibilities emerges. Combatting surveillance culture is possible.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Association of University Professors. 1960. "Student Cheating." *AAUP Bulletin* 46 (4):383–384.

Beck, Estee. 2016. "Writing Educator Responsibilities for Discussing the History and Practice of Surveillance and Privacy in Writing Classrooms." *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* 20 (2). https://kairos.technorhetoric.net/20.2/topoi/beck-et-al/beck.html (Accessed October 4, 2021).

Betensky, Carolyn, Seth Kahn, Maria Maisto, and Talia Schaffer. 2018. "Common Good, Not Common Despair." *Profession*. https://profession.mla.org/common-good-not-common-despair/.(Accessed October 6, 2021)

Blackboard. (n.d.) "Blackboard Analytics for Learn." . https://www.blackboard.com/teaching-learning/data-and-analytics/analytics-for-learn. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Bowers, William. 1968. "Normative Constraints on Deviant Behavior in the College Context." *Sociometry* 31:370–85.

_____. 1964. "Student Dishonesty and Its Control in College." New York: Columbia University.

Carter, Thomas M. 1928. "What College Students Think with Respect to Cheating in Examination." *The Phi Delta Kappan* 11 (1):3–10.

Chambers, Mary-Lynn. 2016. *Pedagogy and Practice: A Multi-Modal Approach for a Multi-Ethnic Online Classroom*. Champaign (IL): Common Ground Publishing.

Chen, Aron. 2020. "COVID-19 Quarantine Makes It Easier to Cheat in Exams in China." PingWest, April 12. https://en.pingwest.com/a/6376. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Daniels, Edgar F. 1960. "The Dishonest Term Paper." *College English* 21 (7):403–5.

Doyle, Lillian and Marie Foote. 1925. "The Pledge as an Instrument to Secure Honesty in Examinations." *Peabody Journal of Education* 3 (2):79–84.

Duin, Ann Hill and Jason Tham. 2020. "The Current State of Analytics: Implications for Learning Management System (LMS) Use in Writing Pedagogy." *Computers and Composition* 55 (1):1-23.

Gillentine, Flora Myers. 1937. "Why Do College Students Cheat?" *Peabody Journal of Education* 15 (1):15–17.

Hawkins, Frederick. 1932. "The Battle Against Cheating." *The School Review* 40 (10):781–86.

Heitzeg, Nancy A. 2009. "Education or Incarceration: Zero Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline." *Forum on Public Policy*:1-21.

Hetherington, E. Mavis, and Solomon E. Feldman. 1964. "College Cheating As a Function of Subject and Situational Variables." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 55 (4):212–18.

Howard, Rebecca Moore. 2001. "Forget About Policing Plagiarism. Just Teach." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 16. https://www.chronicle.com/article/forget-about-policing-plagiarism-just-teach/. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Kim, Dongbin and John L. Rury. 2007. "The Changing Profile of College Access: The Truman Commission and Enrollment Patterns in the Postwar Era." *History of Education Quarterly* 47 (3):302–27.

Kuhn, Bertha M. 1957. "Perspective on Plagiarism." *College Composition and Communication* 8 (4):251–53.

Lancaster, Thomas and Codrin Cotarlan. 2021. "Contract Cheating by STEM Students Through a File Sharing Website: A COVID-19 Pandemic Perspective." *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 17 (1). doi: 10.1007/s40979-021-00070-0.

Loeb, Lea. 2021. "Cal State LA was Caught in a Large-Scale Cheating Scandal, but It's Not Alone. XPress Newspaper, March 30. https://goldengatexpress.org/97004/campus/cal-state-la-was-caught-in-a-large-scale-cheating-scandal-but-its-not-alone/. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Medovoi, Leerom. 2005. *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Moro, Jeffrey. 2020. "Against Cop Shit." JeffreyMoro.com, February 13. https://jeffreymoro.com/blog/2020-02-13-against-cop-shit/. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Morris, Sean Michael and Jesse Stommel. 2017. "A Guide For Resisting EdTech." *Hybrid Pedagogy*, June 15. https://hybridpedagogy.org/resisting-edtech/. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Mott-Smith, Jennifer. 2017. "Bad Idea About Writing: Plagiarism Deserves To Be Punished." Inside Higher Education, May 3. https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/05/23/why-plagiarism-not-necessarily-deceitful-or-deserving-censure-essay. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

NAACP. 2005. "Interrupting the School to Prison Pipe-line." Washington DC.

O'Neil, Cathy. 2016. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy.* New York: Crown.

Patil, Anushka and Jonah Engel Bromwich. 2020. "How It Feels When Software Watches You Take Tests." *The New York Times*, September 29. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/style/testing-schools-proctorio.html. (Accessed November 12, 2021).

Price, Margaret. 2002. "Beyond 'Gotcha!': Situating Plagiarism in Policy and Pedagogy." *College Composition and Communication* 54 (1):88–115. https://doi.org/10.2307/1512103

Reaves, Brian A. 2015. Campus Law Enforcement, 2011-12. Washington, DC: The Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Salem, Richard G., and William J. Bowers. 1970. "Severity of Formal Sanctions as a Deterrent to Deviant Behavior." *Law & Society Review* 5 (1):21–40.

Satheesan, Akash. "Protario's Facial Recognition Is Racist." https://proctor.ninja/proctorios-facial-recognition-is-racist. (Accessed November 12, 2021).

Sawyer, Wendy. 2017. "How Much Do Incarcerated People Earn In Each State?" Prison Policy Initiative, April 10. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages/. (Accessed November 23, 2021).

Schorn, Susan. 2007. "Parallel Plagiarism Detection Test of TurnItIn, SafeAssign, and Google: Preliminary Results." Austin (TX): University of Texas at Austin. https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/2007PlagTest.pdf. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Schorn, Susan. 2016. "Cheating Students: How Plagiarism Detection Software Defrauds Learners and Teachers." Paper presented at the Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference, Raleigh, North Carolina, July 14-17.

Sellers, Savannah. 2021. "College Students Discuss Cheating During the Pandemic." https://www.today.com/video/college-students-discuss-cheating-during-the-pandemic-108961861773. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Stavisky, Leonard Price. 1973. "Term Paper 'Mills,' Academic Plagiarism, and State Regulation." *Political Science Quarterly* 88 (3):445–461.

Steininger, M, R.E. Johnson, and D.K. Kirts. 1964. "Cheating on College Examinations as a Function of Situationally Aroused Anxiety and Hostility." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 55 (6):317–24.

"Term Paper Companies and the Constitution." 1974. *Duke Law Journal* 1973 (6):1275–1317.

Top 15 Misconceptions About TurnItIn.com. 2013. TurnItIn.com, May 23. https://www.turnitin.com/blog/top-15-misconceptions-about-turnitin. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Trachtenberg, Stephen Joel. 1972. "What Happened to the Buffalo?" *Change* 4 (8):45–47.

TurnItIn.Com Homepage. 2000. Internet Archive, October 18. https://web.archive.org/web/20001018220601/http://www.turnitin.com:80/. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Vie, Stephanie. 2013. "A Pedagogy of Resistance Toward Plagiarism Detection Technologies." *Computers and Composition* 30 (1):3–15.

Watson, Joe. 2016. "Corporations, Colleges and Cities Dump Private Prison Stock." *Prison Legal News*, Oct. 3.

https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2016/oct/3/corporations-colleges-and-cities-dump-private-prison-stock/. (Accessed November 23, 2021).

Weale, Sally. 2021. "Cheating on the Rise in US Universities During COVID, Researchers Say." *The Guardian,* February 10. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/feb/10/cheating-on-the-rise-in-uk-universities-during-covid-say-researchers. (Accessed October 19, 2021).

Whitsel, Dottie. 1954. "What Price Grades?" *Peabody Journal of Education* 31 (6):347–48.

Wrightsman, Lawrence S. 1959. "Cheating: A Research Area in Need of Resuscitation." *Peabody Journal of Education* 37 (3):145–49.

Amy J. Wan (she/her/hers) is Associate Professor of English at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center where she teaches undergraduate and graduate classes on writing, literacy, and pedagogy. She is the author of *Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Training in Anxious Times* (2014). Her writing has also appeared in *College English, Journal of College Literacy and Learning, Rhetoric Review, Literacy in Composition Studies*, and *Radical Teacher*. Her current project analyzes how to create spaces for change and resistance within the global US university through a historical and contemporary study of policies addressing access, diversity, race, and language. Email: amy.wan@qc.cuny.edu

Lindsey Albracht (she/her/hers) is a Lecturer of English at Queens College. She currently teaches undergraduate classes on writing, and previously worked in interdisciplinary faculty education and in the field of TESOL. Her research considers what abolitionist movements teach us about the wider ecologies that shape language reception practices. Her forthcoming work will appear in the edited collection, *Racing Translingualism in Composition: Toward a Race-Conscious Translingualism,* and in a *Studies in Writing & Rhetoric (SWR) Series.* Email: lindsey.albracht@qc.cuny.edu

VESSELS OF FLESH AND BONES: POLICING AND RACIAL (DIS)IDENTIFICATIONS IN TA-NEHISI COATES'S *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME*[1]

Eva Puyuelo Ureña
University of Barcelona

ABSTRACT

The year when Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) was published has gone down as the deadliest year for black youth at the hands of policemen, with no less than 1,134 murders recorded. As he states in many interviews, this is one of the reasons that led Coates to pen his work: to publicly lament so many losses; to confront the difficulties to mourn such violent and untimely deaths; and to shed light on the murderous racist practices that black individuals deal with on a daily basis. To do so, Coates embarks on a journey through history in which he memorializes many black individuals who, until now, have lost their lives in racist violent attacks—from his friend Prince Jones and other several well-known individuals murdered in the last decades, such as Michael Brown or Sean Bell, to, as Toni Morrison puts it, "the disremembered and unaccounted for" (2010, 323). Far from only providing Coates and his son with crucial information about the sociality of blackness, witnessing the death of so many also instils in both a feeling of belonging. Coates's attempt at developing communal bonds through his narration riffs on the concept of "bottomline blackness," which Elizabeth Alexander coined amidst her analysis of the public responses to Rodney King's beating, which she regards as an incident that ended up "consolidat[ing] group affiliations" (78) and forging a "traumatized collective historical memory" (79). Drawing on Ta-Nehisi Coates's celebrated memoir, and bearing into consideration Coates's telling his son that "there is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin" (2015, 25), this paper engages in the ongoing discussion about whether Coates's representation of racial bigotries can foster empathic relations or, on the contrary, disavow easy identification from readers.
Keywords: Ta-Nehisi Coates; Racism; Policing; Empathy; Phenomenology.

"It begins with flesh. With meat and muscle. With a matrix of tissue.

It begins with the body —textured and text. The body as vernacular.

The body as song. It begins, simply, with black skin"

(Jason Parham, "The Flesh Gives Empathy," 2020)

Eva Puyuelo Ureña |

Ta-Nehisi Coates's seminal memoir *Between the World and Me* (2015) features nowadays amongst the most important texts documenting racial bigotries of the last centuries (Smith 2013), as it records the vast array of discriminatory practices that "land, with great violence, upon the [black] body" (14). In fact, several critics have insisted that the text, which was published only a year after the horrific murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, makes a substantial contribution to the ongoing discussion on the expendability of black bodies (Alexander 2015; Nance 2015; Abramowitsch 2017; Quinn 2017).[2] Written in the form of a letter that in several ways mirrors that of James Baldwin's in *The Fire Next Time* (1952), Coates's memoir can be interpreted as an urgent warning that a concerned black father gives to his fifteen-year-old black son—that black bodies are trapped in a double-bind of social illegibility that renders them inhuman whilst simultaneously casting them as problems that need to be dealt with (Miller 2016, 16). To do so, Coates embarks on a journey through history in which he memorializes many black individuals who, until now, have lost their lives in racist violent attacks—from his friend Prince Jones and other several well-known individuals murdered in the last decades, such as Trayvon Martin or Sean Bell, to, as Toni Morrison puts it, "the disremembered and unaccounted for" (2010, 323).

Far from only providing Coates and his son with crucial information about the sociality of blackness, witnessing the death of so many also instils in both a feeling of belonging. As Emily J. Lordi posits, "representations of grief construct an ever-expanding black community, one that comprises 'murdered sons' as well as imagined future members" (2017, 45). Coates's attempt at developing communal bonds through his narration riffs on the concept of "bottomline blackness," which Elizabeth Alexander coined amidst her analysis of the public responses to Rodney King's beating, which she regards as an incident that ended up "consolidat[ing] group affiliations" (78) and forging a "traumatized collective historical memory" (79). Other similar reactions to contemporary situations have been, to mention but a few, protesters yelling "I Am

---

[2] According to *The Guardian*, a total of 1,131 black people were killed by police officers in 2014 in the US. The rate increased the following year, and it reached an all-time record of 1,134 (Swaine et al. 2015).

Trayvon Martin" in the mass riots ensuing the boy's murder in 2012, or the more recent cry for help "I Can't Breathe" that appeared in the banners and flags that swamped thousands of cities worldwide and that replicated George Floyd's last words in early 2020. Drawing on Ta-Nehisi Coates's celebrated memoir, and bearing into consideration Coates's telling his son that "there is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin" (2015, 25), this paper engages in the ongoing discussion about whether Coates's representation of racist bigotries can foster empathic relations or, on the contrary, disavow easy identification from readers.

YOUR BODY, MY BODY: ON HISTORICITY, BLACK PHENOMENOLOGY, AND FLESH MEMORY

The black body holds a very central position in *Between the World and Me*. In fact, it is such a recurrent *topos* in the memoir that Coates seems almost obsessed about it—by Tressie McMillan Cottom's count, he alludes to it "some 101 times over 156 sparse pages" (2015, n.p.).[3] At different times in the text Coates portrays the black body—which, as we will discuss, sometimes is not necessarily his—as a body that can be lost (5), "destroyed" (9), "shielded" (23), "robbed" (65), or even as a "vessel of flesh and bone" that can be "taken" and "shattered on the concrete" (83).[4] As a result, some critics (Haile III 2017; Abramowitsch 2017) have maintained that to speak about Coates's approach to corporeality is to speak about a phenomenology of the black body. Even though Frantz Fanon is considered today the father of black phenomenology (Johnson 1993; Gordon 1997, 2000; Haile III 2017), the first ruminations on the subject can be traced back to Frederick Douglass, in particular to his work *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), where he claimed to have realized his embodiment after engaging in a fistfight with Edward

---

[3] For Haile III the number is significantly lower, as he claims that Coates "mentions it some forty-two times throughout the book" (Haile III 2017, 494). A fast search of the word "body" in the e-book version of the memoir provides a total of 114 results, 73 more if the word searched is "bodies." Of course, these numbers are not precise, as the search does not specify whether they are black or white.

[4] The word "vessel" has been central in theorizations about the phenomenology of the black body. In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya Hartman notes that it is the fungibility of slaves, that is, their characterization as chattel, that enables their being equated with vessels. "The fungibility of the commodity," she writes, "makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (21).

Covey, a slaveholder. Douglass's outstanding victory led him to claim that "this spirit made me a freeman in *fact,* while I remained a slave in *form*" (247; emphasis in the original) after acknowledging, earlier in the text, that he was "a *living embodiment* of mental and physical wretchedness" (172; my emphasis).

W.E.B. Du Bois also paid utmost attention to the phenomenology of the black body, as he evidenced with the concept of double consciousness (1903). In contending that blackness responds to a twoness that converges in a body (2007, 8), Du Bois was claiming for "a coming-into-being of consciousness" (Pittman 2016, n.p.)—an awareness of one's own body as perceived by others. Du Bois's exploration of double consciousness as an expression of phenomenology has been of particular interest to Paget Henry, who considered Du Bois's concept crucial in the development of a "comprehensive phenomenology of [black] self-consciousness" (2005, 85). Notwithstanding Du Bois's efforts to get to grips with the sociality of black bodies, and as we have already indicated, Frantz Fanon has often been considered the pioneer in the field of black phenomenology. Amongst Fanon's major remarks in one of his most renowned works, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), it is his contention that "I was an object in the midst of other objects" (109) that has garnered greater interest, as it encapsulates the most prominent principles of his theory—black bodies have been, and still are, transformed into objects by the power of whiteness.

The strong materiality attributed to black bodies in *Between the World and Me* stands out against the lack of corporality of whiteness that has been deemed problematic at many different levels (Gilroy 2000; Young 2010). In the view of Simon Abramowitsch, Coates's proclivity to depict "the embodiment of blackness and the abstraction of whiteness" (2017, 462) is conspicuous from the very beginning of the memoir, when the narrator is being interviewed by a white woman on a television studio. "When the host asked me about my body," Coates states, "her face faded from the screen, and was replaced by a scroll of words, written by me earlier that week" (2015, 5). According to Abramowitsch, Coates's description of the interview portends his investment in diverting the focus of attention away from whiteness. He writes, "though this face of whiteness precedes and provokes the despairing account that follows, it

vanishes. What becomes visible instead is Coates's own writing about the vulnerability of the *black body*" (Abramowitsch 2017, 460; my emphasis).

The opening pages of *Between the World and Me* set down the fundamental ideas that later underpin the text in its whole—from Coates's portrayal of whiteness as a fading abstraction (5); his fixation with the black body, its sociality, and its historicity (5); to his comprehension of racial discrimination as a multidimensional and interactional phenomenon (8); or even to his intentions behind penning down the memoir (9). Reflecting upon his son's reaction to the absolution of Michael Brown's murderer, one of the critical moments that he assures to have prompted him to write the letter to his son, Coates makes a statement that, for many (Abramowitsch 2017; Haile III 2017), encapsulates his approach to the black body. When he hears his son crying after learning about the tragic news, Coates decides "not [to] tell you that it would be okay, because I never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents told me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your *body*, and you must find some way to live *within the all of it*" (2015, 12; my emphasis). For James B. Haile III, who has worked extensively on, in his own words, the "black phenomenology of the body" (2016, 495), the latter contention breaks new ground for the understanding of the black body as a product of its historicity. Haile III writes,

> There are key moments from Coates's passages that should focus our attention: . . . his emphasis on heritage as a historical site of/for memory —the destruction of the black body, then, acts as a site of/for national historical memory, . . . his usage of tradition as the symbolic linking to one's past —it is through the destruction of the black body that America links its past to its present, [or] the word choice of *within* rather than just with. (Haile III 2016, 494; emphasis in the original)

Coates figures the black body as the intentional result of a series of practices used to establish and maintain hierarchies of power, proving that, as Charles Johnson phrases it, "it is from whites that . . . the black body comes" (1993, 606). Pages after stating that "the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men" (12), one of Coates's paramount declarations on the artificiality of black bodies, he adds that "I was black because of *history* and *heritage*. There was no nobility in falling, in being bound,

in living oppressed, and *there was no inherent meaning in black blood*" (55; my emphasis). "Black blood wasn't black", he concludes, "black skin wasn't even black" (55).

Coates's rhetoric ends up holding out the possibility of distinguishing between *two* bodies—the real body, an amalgamation of flesh, organs, and bones, also called the "physical body;" and the abstract body, a preconceived perception of the images projected upon the former, also known as the "conceptual body" (Young 2010, 7). Harvey Young attributes the creation of the latter to the mapping of "popular connotations of blackness . . . across or internalized within black people," which results in the construction of a "second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, [that] shadows or doubles the real one. It is the black body and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of racialized projection" (2010, 7). The problem is, as we have already surmised, that the abstract body often overshadows the real body, that is, that the meanings attributed to blackness prevail over the body understood as a material reality. Harvey Young explains this process thus:

> When a driver speeds past a pedestrian and yells "Nigger", she launches her epithet at an idea of the body, an instantiation of her understanding of blackness. The pedestrian, who has been hailed and experiences the violence of the address, which seems to erase her presence and transform her into something else (an idea held by another), becomes a casualty of misrecognition. *The shadow overwhelms the actual figure . . .* The epithet . . . brings together the physical black body and the conceptual black body. [It] blur[s] them . . . The slippage of abstraction into materiality frequently resulted in the creation of an embodied experience of blackness that was tantamount to imprisonment. (2010, 7; my emphasis)

In distinguishing between physical and conceptual bodies, Coates is also recalling Hortense Spillers's influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), where she claims that the physical body is never seen, insofar as it is always preceded by a first layer on which meaning is inscribed—the conceptual body or, in her own words, the flesh. Spillers describes the flesh as "the zero degree of social contextualization" and as "a primary narrative" (Spillers 1987, 67). She writes, "before the body, there is the flesh, [which] does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" (Spillers 1987, 67). For Spillers, the

physical body is often hurt as a violent reaction against the abstract body, but injuries can be observed in both—in the former, violence takes the form of a cut or a bruise; but its marking is somehow transferred into the latter, which becomes proof, or a reminder, of the long history of suffering black individuals have been through. In his essay "Black Care" (2016), which revisits Spillers's hypothesis, Calvin Warren offers important commentary on pain inscribing itself in another dimension that is not material. He writes, "what is stripped or ruptured leaves a mark—a sign of destruction . . . that can be felt or registered on a different plane of existence" (Warren 2016, 37). For Warren, then, "the laceration is not just a corporeal sign; although the body might bear its marks, it is registered somewhere else" (2016, 39); namely, in the development of a feeling of worthlessness in racialized communities or in creation of a traumatic environment shared in a community that is not only very much traversed but also actively constituted by violence. Last but not least, Spillers also defends that whilst the body is individual, that is, that it is a material reality that is particular to each one of us and that cannot be transferred, at least not in its completeness, the flesh, understood as the manifold signifiers attributed to the body, refers to a series of conditions that are shared by a group of similar individuals. For Spillers, the flesh contains "the long and brutal history of the violent annotations of Black being" (qtd. in Sharpe 2016, 115).

The body that is the object of racist violent assaults in *Between the World and Me* is often neither Coates's nor his son's, but rather a black body that seeks to represent black experience in general, but which does not belong to anybody in particular. Put another way, the discrimination described in the memoir is often witnessed, not experienced by the author himself, but nonetheless believed to be something that all black individuals might be subjected to. Simon Abramowitsch, who has been vocal in exploring Coates's memoir in terms of empathy and readership, claims that "many of Coates's examples of racial violence are from history, news reports, and the accounts of other writers" (2017, 464). Whilst one might consider that Coates's distancing from the events purveyed might result in the disavowal of his readership, Abramowitsch contends that its effect is quite the opposite. "What emerges from these representations," he writes, "is a form of witnessing intended not to engender

empathetic feelings toward another that *is not but might be the self*, but instead to provoke direct identification" (2017, 464; emphasis in the original).[5] Abramowitsch seems to suggest that Coates does not need to have experienced everything he explains first-hand to awaken the empathy of his black readers. However, as a black man, he is entitled to identify with a history of communal suffering; put another way, it is his flesh, besides his body, that inscribes him into a tradition shared among black people.

Ta-Nehisi Coates's acknowledgement that blackness predisposes all black individuals to living similar experiences, in particular in relation to racial violence, bespeaks of Elizabeth Alexander's concept of "bottom line blackness" (1994, 80), which she coined as a reaction to Rodney King's beating in Los Angeles on March 3, 1991, and in response to the backlash against the recording of the attack disseminated afterwards. After formulating the hypothesis that a feeling of kinship was generated amongst the black individuals who witnessed Rodney King being battered,[6] Alexander highlights how the spectacle of black death has "forg[ed] a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict" (1994, 79). In her opinion, the constant subjection to the view of a black body in pain embeds black individuals into black communities, that is, makes black individuals feel connected to a community with whom they have in common, at least, their likeness to suffer racial discrimination. As Alexander puts it, witnessing the suffering of the black body "informs our personal understanding of our individual selves as a larger group" (79). It is precisely the feeling of collectiveness engendered by a shared history of discrimination that she dubs "bottom line blackness" (80)—the creation of a "'we,' even when that 'we' is differentiated" (80).

Coates's illustrating that the strong probability of being a victim of racial brutality generates an empathic identification amongst black individuals is most

---

[5] Harvey Young similarly states that "first-hand encounters with a racializing projection are not a requirement of embodied black experience" (Young 2010, 5).

[6] Although she focuses on exploring the responses to Rodney King's video, Alexander also draws upon two other cases to illustrate her point—slave narratives and Emmett Till, whose lynched body was displayed on an open casket by order of his own mother so that everybody could witness the heinous crime committed against him.

evident when he compares his son to other black men who have already been targeted, arrested, and even murdered as a result of racial profiling. Whilst it is Michael Brown's death from which Coates's son learns about his own vulnerability at the very beginning of the text (11-12), it is Trayvon Martin who Coates compares him to, by pointing out that "there is *no real distance* between you and Trayvon Martin, and thus Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way that he could never terrify me" (2015, 25; my emphasis). Simply put, both of them were black boys living within the same historical moment, and whilst it was Martin who had been killed, Coates believes it might well have been Samori or, for that matter, any other black kid. Coates's contention bears exceptional testimony to the fact that "the violence that is watched . . . is experienced" (Alexander 1994, 85).[7]

In seeking to construct a communal memory of suffering amongst black individuals, "bottom line blackness" also has didactic purposes. In this respect, Alexander underscores that "corporeal images of terror suggest that experience can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in memory as knowledge. This knowledge is necessary to one who believes 'it would be my turn next'" (1994, 83). Coates's acknowledgment that blackness often equates with being "death-bound" (Moten 2013, 739) not only does it bring him closer to other black individuals, but it also informs his individual self. At several moments in the text, he intimates that only after the murder of Prince Jones was he able to learn most of the things he knows about blackness today (2015, 131).[8] Witnessing the murder of black men provided Coates and

---

[7] This also explains why, in the weeks following Trayvon Martin's murder, a lot of protestors wore hoodies and carried banners with the messages "I am Trayvon Martin" or "We are all Trayvon Martin." Interestingly enough, a sort of counter movement questioned those identifications, and protesters claimed that actually "We Are NOT Trayvon Martin." Adherents to the movement believed in the singularity of Martin's murder and, most important of all, believed that there was a fundamental difference between them and the boy—that they were alive, and Martin was not (Auslen 2013).

[8] Prince Jones was a friend of Coates who was targeted, pulled over, and murdered by a police officer in Prince George County, Maryland, on September 1, 2000, in a case of mistaken identity. Coates describes the situation thus: "The officer had been dressed like an undercover drug dealer. He'd been sent out to track a man whose build was five foot four and 250 pounds. We know from the coroner that Prince's body was six foot three and 211 pounds. We know that the other man was apprehended later. The charges against him were dropped. None of this mattered. We know that his superiors sent this officer to follow Prince from Maryland, through Washington, D.C., and into Virginia, where the officer shot Prince several times. We know that the officer confronted Prince with his gun drawn, and no badge" (80).

his son with crucial information about the sociality of blackness, illustrating that, as Alexander also notes, "in order to survive, black people have paradoxically had to witness their own murder and defilement and then pass along the epic tale of violation" (1994, 90). Taking into consideration that Coates's memoir has often been regarded as an inventory of the myriad forms of discrimination blacks are subject to (Alexander 2015; Nance 2015; Abramowitsch 2017; Quinn 2017), we could even claim that "bottom line blackness" operates also in an extra-diegetic dimension. In providing imagery of the black body in pain, Coates is passing his understanding of blackness onto other black readers, who might find it helpful to comprehend their being in the world.

Several scholars have identified an inherent problem in the belief that blackness predisposes all black individuals to suffer from racist discriminations in a similar way (Hall 1996; Gilroy 2000; Bennett 2015; Hilton 2015; León 2015; Lewis 2016; Abramowitsch 2017). Although Elizabeth Alexander noted it in passing, she already warned that "bottom line blackness" might lead to a form of "violence which erases other differentiations and highlights race" (1994, 81). This is why she keeps positing, throughout her text, that the collectiveness that emerges from living similar experiences, either in the past or in the present, or as victims or witnesses, must always be "differentiated" (1994, 81). Put another way, a common past can be indeed identified amongst persons sharing similar characteristics until individual differences are encountered as, in the words of Stuart Hall, "we cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity,' without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, uniqueness" (1996, 394). Paul Gilroy, in his work *Against Race* (2000), also offers fundamental insights into the notion that, even though black folks do indeed have certain phenotypical characteristics in common with each other, they also embody "different lived realities" (qtd. in Young 2010, 8).

In this way, Coates's presumption that blackness is unified in its subjection to racist discrimination has provoked a backlash from literary critics. Black feminists such as Shani O. Hilton (2015) or Brit Bennett (2015) have been vocal in demonstrating that, insofar as Coates's work bids for a generalized approach to blackness that oversees other

intersectional social coordinates, it speaks to a rather small readership. In their view, black women's stories are sidelined in the memoir, which provides a rather masculinized account of policing and other forms of racism and where "the dangers of living in a black female body are mysterious, forever unknowable" (Bennett 2015: n.p.). On the other hand, Cornel West[9] has also scolded Coates for oversimplifying the subject of racial identification in his works, noting that the experiences he speaks about in *Between the World and Me* apply only to a "black elite readership" (Cornish 2017, n.p.) and that he cannot identify with the problems that Coates poses in the text. Coates's vagueness has also been discredited by Christina Sharpe, who maintains that Coates is apparently writing either to whites or to non-radical black individuals (Terrefe 2016, n.p.). To this first critique, she adds a second one—that the text focuses on Coates himself so much that it "abandons a certain criticality" (Terrefe 2016, n.p.), and so she ends up referring to *Between the World and Me* as "a narrative of profound failure" (Terrefe 2016, n.p.). Coates's belief that blackness is unified nurtures, in the end, a sense of disidentification, as he fails to account for how racial bigotries are also inflected by gender and class.[10]

As suggested above, collectiveness amongst different persons is mainly reached through memory, for it is the acknowledgement of a shared history of suffering that, as Coates very well illustrates, brings black individuals together (Spillers 1987; Alexander 1994; Young 2010). Certainly, it is precisely the historical backdrop of *Between the World and Me* that is one of the memoir's greatest strengths, as it does not only help keeping

---

[9] Their differences in opinion date back to 2015, when, in a Facebook post, West accused Coates of being "a clever wordsmith with journalistic talent who avoids any critique of the Black president in power" (qtd. in López 2017, n.p.). Their hostility reached its peak when West published an op-ed entitled "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle" (2017), where he accused Coates of "represent[ing] the neoliberal wing that sounds militant about white supremacy but renders black fightback invisible" (West 2017, n.p.). He then blamed Coates for not being critical of Barack Obama, and concluded that "the disagreement between Coates and me is clear: any analysis or vision of our world that omits the centrality of Wall Street power, US military policies, and the complex dynamics of class, gender, and sexuality in black America is too narrow and dangerously misleading" (2017, n.p.). In response to West's criticisms, Coates tried to defend himself by alleging that his knowledge is limited, and that he does not feel entitled to discuss issues he does not understand (Noah 2017).

[10] For the sake of space and consistency with the article's purpose, only a brief analysis on the memoir's shortcomings has been included here. For more information on Coates's invisibilization of women, see Bennett (2015), Hilton (2015), Duffy (2015), and Bodenner (2015). For more information on Coates's class blindness, see Terrefe (2016), Cornish (2017), and West (2017).

track of the different expressions racial discrimination has taken on throughout history, but it also contributes to memorializing the victims and weaving different black experiences together. Although at points Coates resorts to the employment of allegories to recall the past, as when he claims himself to be shackled (30), he often draws upon history in a rather explicit, and at many times also chronological, manner. Most of his ruminations are triggered by his visit to "what remained of Petersburg, Shirley Plantation, and the Wilderness" (99) with his son and his nephew. Troubled by the fact that, whilst in the Petersburg Battlefield, visitors "seemed most interested in flanking maneuvers, hardtack, smoothbore rifles, grapeshot, and ironclads" (99) than in the important social changes that the conflict brought about, Coates recalls the situation previous to the war as a "robbery" of black bodies, and he concludes that "robbery is what this is, what it always was" (101). Summoning up slavery helps him contest whether any progress achieved by black individuals can be referred to as actual progress—he urges his readers to regard emancipation always in parallel with the bloodshed in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Jim Crow laws, or even the Second World War. Two ideas are derived from Coates's reasoning. First, that progress for certain black individuals was granted at the expense of the death of many several others; and, second, that black bodies today still bear the burden of chattel slavery. In fact, at the end of his analysis, Coates states that "there is no difference between the killing of Prince Jones and the murders attending these killing fields because both are rooted in the assumed inhumanity of black people" (110).

Coates's presentification of the past[11] becomes a means of asserting that, today, black bodies inhabit "the afterlives of slavery" (Hartman 2007); in other words, policing and racial targeting are vestiges of past forms of racial brutality that are still very much present. It is in her acclaimed work *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) where Saidiya Hartman first reads the contemporary condition of black

---

[11] My use of the expression is taken from Ana Lucía Araujo (2009), who defines it as the ways in which the past keeps affecting the present, turning "the present [into] a place or a moment of rupture, a process that very often involves the search for an identity that has been denied, lost, or suppressed" (2).

bodies as a reenactment of slavery (6). In her view, chattel slavery did not end in 1865, but rather metamorphosed into other forms of human exploitation. Accordingly, she writes,

> Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery *persists* as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because *black lives are still imperiled and devalued* by racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is *the afterlife of slavery*—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (2007, 6; my emphasis)

As a result, for Hartman, as well as for Coates, speaking of slavery as a reality of the past is a contradiction in terms, for a past that is reenacted in the present cannot be identified as past (Trouillot 1995).[12] In this respect, in her essay "Venus in Two Acts" (2008), Hartman urges for a need to "narrat[e] the time of slavery as our present" (2008, 12), a need that is also blatant in Coates's memoir, as he constantly exhorts his readers to remember that the current aggressions exerted against black bodies are indeed "heritage and legacy" (2015, 10); that is, reminiscences of a past that keeps repeating itself.[13] Hartman's arguments had an important bearing on Christina Sharpe, who, drawing on the former's concept of the "afterlives of slavery" (Hartman 2007, 6), regarded black bodies as living "in the wake" (Sharpe 2016). Although the descriptions of "the wake" purveyed in her work are numerous and varied,[14] the term shares many similarities with Hartman's, as it refers to

---

[12] Michel-Rolph Trouillot believed that the past is always relative, as he claimed that "the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something over there only because I am here. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past" (1995, 44).

[13] Contrary to this idea, Trouillot contends that "the perpetuation of U.S. racism is less a legacy of slavery than a modern phenomenon renewed by generations of white immigrants" (1995, 49).

[14] She acknowledges that "the wake" might have different meanings, and that her approach to the term seeks to bring all of them together. As a matter of fact, she claims for the need to "think the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings", which she later lists as follows: "the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness" (2016, 17-18).

> living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased. (Sharpe 2016, 15)

For Sharpe, persons who have not perished yet, have the moral obligation to engage in the "wake work," which she describes as "a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (52) in a permanent antiblack environment that she dubs "the weather" (102). To "resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence" (41) of death, black individuals must remember that their breathing today is conferred by the breathlessness of many others who died in the past. The two main practices of "wake work" that Sharpe devises are black annotation and black redaction, which in turn refer to a need to find "new modes of writing [and] new modes of making-sensible" (113) that Hartman also calls for in "Venus in Two Acts" (2008). In this vein, it is worth noting that both Sharpe and Hartman are major exponents of a discursive practice known as "critical fabulation" (2008, 11), which Hartman herself describes as the only way to "rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom" (2008, 3). In inscribing itself in the intersection between critical theory, fiction, and historical and archival records, "critical fabulation" epitomizes an urgency to look for new ways to speak about black suffering.

Coates's championing of the historical continuity of racial violence is reminiscent of Houston A. Baker's "critical memory" (1994), which he later reconceptualized as "black memory" (2001), and also of Hortense Spillers's "flesh memory" (2013). Houston A. Baker coined the term "critical memory" in his renowned essay "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere" (1994), where he described it as "the cumulative, collective maintenance of a record that draws into a relationship of significant instants of time past and the always uprooted homelessness of now" (Baker 1994, 3). Interestingly enough, for Baker, the history of blackness can be analyzed through two complementary attitudes: nostalgia and critical memory. Both are ways of identifying a shared history amongst black individuals, but whilst the former resonates with homesickness and with

the idealization of the past as a moment "filled with golden virtues, golden men and sterling events" (Baker 1994, 3), the latter claims for its ethical evaluation as a means to look for new ways to confront the present. Put another way, nostalgic memory prompts the "beautification of history" (1994, 4), but critical memory compels "the black intellectual . . . to keep before his eyes—and the eyes of the United States—a history that is embarrassing, macabre, and always bizarre with respect to race. The clarity bestowed by black critical memory is painful" (Baker 2001, 154).

Even though black bodies are central in Coates's work, white bodies hover over the margins of the story and are often subsumed within an impersonal and abstract mass that acquires different names throughout the memoir regardless of being the main source of black distress. In fact, we could claim that there is an altogether generalized lack of referentiality when instances of inter-racial discrimination are purveyed. Coates's presentification of the past prompts him to draw into the cruelty of slavery, the legalization of racial segregation, and the racism that is often implicit in academic disciplines. Nonetheless, the perpetrators of the aforementioned events are not individual persons, but instead the systems themselves, as if they emerged, settled, and operated without a human subject behind them. It is worth noting that he does not even mention the names of the murderers of Michael Brown nor Trayvon Martin regardless of the controversies that their exonerations stirred up, a fact that lays bare Coates's investment in putting the spotlight on the victims, and not on their murderers.

The lack of corporality of whiteness in the text implies a lack of empathic identification from white readers that has been rendered utterly problematic (Alexander 2015; Abramowitsch 2017). Indeed, Coates's focusing too much on the materiality of blackness and on the ethereality of whiteness has proven to be a two-edged sword. As Abramowitsch very well indicates, "if attention to the black body addresses the black reader, the white body's erasure invites a strange spectatorship, *implicated* and *excused* at the same time" (Abramowitsch 2017, 469; my emphasis). In other words, as Kyle Smith also notes, Coates's "paint[ing] all white people as equally hapless in their sin" ends up "comforting . . . his white readership" (2015, n.p.). The problem that ensues from Coates's strategy is clear—if the abstraction of whiteness

offers whites a moral egress, that is, if they do not identify themselves with the facts retold, why would they be involved in seeking answers to the questions he poses?

CONCLUSIONS

In his memoir *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates approaches racial issues through such a vast array of modes that it should not be surprising that he has been appointed as "the single best writer on the subject of race in the United States" (Smith 2013, n.p.). Coates's understanding of racism, which is both so visceral and heartfelt that readers have even claimed they could feel it in their own bodies (Alexander 2015; Khon 2015; Schuessler 2015), sets out from a phenomenological perception of the black body that, in a way that is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's contributions to the matter, interprets the latter as an object; in particular, as a vessel whose being is bestowed upon by virtue of its own emptiness. Either in their vulnerability, protection, or destruction, black bodies enjoy from a very strong materiality in *Between the World and Me*, so much so that several commentators have agreed that Coates succeeds in portraying blackness in all its splendor—just as he draws upon the pain and difficulties of being black, he also celebrates its beauty and its ubiquity.

Coates's approach mirrors, in several ways, the concept of "bottom line blackness" (Alexander 1994) which, as suggested above, perfectly illustrates the extent to which group affiliations can be consolidated amongst individuals who feel a shared propensity to being victims of racist practices. As Claudia Rankine avers, "there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black" (2015, 146). That communities can be forged upon witnessing violent events is tethered to the phenomenon of communal memory, which suggests that all the racist interactions a person has been through are somewhat activated when an incident that is somehow reminiscent of all the former is viewed. As Alexander puts it, "bodily experience, both individually experienced bodily trauma as well as collective cultural trauma, comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship" (80). Alexander's

words allow for the possibility of believing not only that empathic relations can be fostered when being exposed to violent events, but even that black individuals can indeed feel in their own bodies identical physical and psychological sensations to the victims' to the extent that the distinction between watching and experiencing ends up being eventually blurred (85).

Nonetheless, inasmuch as Coates cherishes the materiality of black bodies, he also approaches whiteness—at the risk of oversimplification, the root from which black suffering develops—as a fading abstraction. Coates's strategy is utterly problematic: because whiteness resists individualization, that is, because it is fathomed as ubiquitous and not necessarily comprised in a particular body, the attacks that Coates depicts in the memoir are seldom ascribed to a person. This is particularly evident in relation to the moments in which whiteness is blamed—something that might be interpreted as "disavowing . . . direct identification and empathy from white and non-black readers", who are in the end offered "the individual escape that he intends for his son" (Abramowitsch 2017, 462). In all, *Between the World and Me* bears exceptional testimony to the slipperiness of empathic identifications. Through a powerful rhetoric and a poignant story, Coates seeks to provoke the identification of his black readers by noting that the flesh, rather than the body, brings them together. But the memoir also illustrates that in Coates's process of creating a collective "we" that is not defined through lived experiences, racist bigotries that are inflected by gender and class are sidelined, proving that, in the end, identifications occur at the expense of disidentifications.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abramowitsch, Simon. 2017. "Addressing Blackness, Dreaming Whiteness: Negotiating 21st-Century Race and Readership in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*." *CLA Journal* 60 (4):458-478.

Alexander, Elizabeth. 1994. "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This? Reading the Rodney King Video(s)." *Public Culture* 7:77-94.

Alexander, Michelle. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates's 'Between the World and Me'". *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/17/books/review/ta-nehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me.html.

Araujo, Ana Lucía. 2009. "Introduction: the Slave Past in the Present." In *Living History: Encountering the Memory of the Heirs of Slavery*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Auslen, Michael. 2013. "'I Am not Trayvon Martin' Post Goes Viral." *USA Today: News*. https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/07/19/i-am-not-trayvon-martin/2567707/.

Baker, Houston A. 1994. "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere". *Public Culture* 7 (1):3-33. https://read.dukeupress.edu/public-culture/article-abstract/7/1/3/32175/Critical-Memory-and-the-Black-Public-Sphere.

_____. 2001. *Critical Memory: Public Spheres, African American Writing, and Black Fathers and Sons in America.* Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Baldwin, James. 1993 (1962). *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Vintage International.

Bennett, Brit. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates and a Generation Waking Up". *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/ta-nehisi-coates-and-a-generation-waking-up.

Chatterton Williams, Thomas. 2015. "Loaded Dice". *London Review of Books*. https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n23/thomas-chatterton-williams/loaded-dice.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. Melbourne: Text Publishing Company.

Cottom, Tressie McMillan. 2015. "*Between the World and Me* Book Club: Two Texts Masquerading as One." *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/ta-nehisi-coates-book-club/398972/.

Cornish, Audie. 2017. "Cornel West Doesn't Want to Be a Neoliberal Darling." *The New York Times Magazine*. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/magazine/cornel-west-doesnt-want-to-be-a-neoliberal-darling.html.

Douglass, Frederick. 1855. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Project Gutenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/202/202-h/202-h.htm.

Du Bois, W.E.B. 2007 (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Duffy, Josie. 2015. "'Between the World and Me' Is for All of Us, even if It Is Not About All of Us." *Rewire News Group*. https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2015/07/15/world-us-even-us/.

Fanon, Franz. 2008 (1952). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Gilroy, Paul. 2000. *Against Race*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gordon, Lewis R. 1997. *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*. New York: Routledge.

_____. 2000. *Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*. New York: Routledge.

Haile III, James B. 2017. "Ta-Nehisi Coates's Phenomenology of the Body." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 31 (3):493-503. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.31.3.0493?seq=1.

Hall, Stuart. 1996. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage.

Hartman, Saidiya. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

_____. 2007. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux.

_____. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, 12 (2):1-14. https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article/12/2/1/32332/Venus-in-Two-Acts.

Henry, Paget. 2005. *Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications*. Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/f3b3/b960ccba1637841401eb95d6199e70d3df2b.pdf.

Hill, Jason D. 2017. "An Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates: The Dream Is Real." *Commentary Magazine*. https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/open-letter-ta-nehisi-coates/.

Hilton, Shani O. 2015. "The Black Experience Isn't Just About Men." *Buzzfeed*. https://www.buzzfeed.com/shani/between-the-world-and-she.

Johnson, Charles. 1993. "A Phenomenology of the Black Body.. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 32 (4):599-613. https://poeticsofpop.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/scan-79.pdf.

Khon, Sally. 2015. "Why White Women Should Read Ta-Nehisi Coates's Book." *ELLE*. https://www.elle.com/culture/books/a29572/what-i-learned-from-reading-ta-nehisi-coates/.

Klein, Ezra. 2016. "Ta-Nehisi Coates: 'I Am a Big Believer in Chaos.'" *Vox*. https://www.vox.com/conversations/2016/12/19/13952578/ta-nehisi-coates-ezra-klein.

León, Felice. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates on Why Whites Like His Writing." *Daily Beast*. https://www.thedailybeast.com/ta-nehisi-coates-on-why-whites-like-his-writing.

Lewis, Thabiti. 2016. "How Fresh and New is the Case Coates Makes?" *African American Review*, 49 (3):192-196.

López, German. 2017. "Cornel West's attacks on Ta-Nehisi Coates, explained." *Vox*. https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/12/20/16795746/ta-nehisi-coates-cornel-west-twitter.

Lordi, Emily J. 2017. "Between the World and the Addressee: Epistolary Nonfiction by Ta-Nehisi Coates and His Peers." *CLA Journal*, 60 (4):434-447. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557004?seq=1.

Mbembe, Achille. 2017. *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Miller, Monica R. 2016. "Black Lives Matter & the Mo(ve)ment of Black Life in America." *Ausgabe* 28. https://fiph.de/veroeffentlichungen/journale/cover-downloads/fiph_026_RZ_Journal_Ausgabe_28_Monica_Miller.pdf?m=1570630394&.

Morrison, Toni. 2010 (1987). *Beloved*. New York: Vintage Books.

Moten, Fred. 2013. "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112 (4):737-780.

Nance, Kevin. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Brings Body of Work to Chicago Humanities Festival." *Chicago Tribune*. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/books/ct-ae-ta-nehisi-coates-humanities-festival-1018-20151016-story.html>

Noah, Trevor. 2017. "Ta-Nehisi Coates's Extended Interview." *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. http://www.cc.com/video-clips/vbyz5z/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-exclusive---ta-nehisi-coates-extended-interview.

Parham, Jason. 2020. "The Flesh Gives Empathy," in *Black Futures*, edited by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham, 186-189. New York: Penguin Random House.

Pittman, John. P. 2016. "Double Consciousness." *Sanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/.

Quinn, Caolan. 2017. "Violence on the Black Body: Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* Acts as a Memoir to the Suffering of the Black Masses in America." *American Literature and Culture at Queen's*. https://blogs.qub.ac.uk/americanists/2017/02/27/violence-on-the-black-body-ta-

nehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me-acts-as-a-memoir-to-the-suffering-of-the-black-masses-in-america/.

Rankine, Claudia. 2015. "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning." *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html.

Schuessler, Jennifer. 2015. "4th Hour: Ta-Nehisi Coates's 'Visceral' Take on Being Black in America." *Songisite*. https://song.ampisite.com/en/4th-Hour%3A-Ta-Nehisi-Coates's-'Visceral'-Take-on-Being-Black-in-America-Jennifer-Schuessler-145773120.html.

Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Smith, Jordan Michael. 2013. "Fear of a Black Pundit: Ta-Nehisi Coates Raises his Voice in American Media." *The Observer*. https://observer.com/2013/03/fear-of-a-black-pundit/.

Smith, Kyle. 2015. "The Hard Untruths of Ta-Nehisi Coates." *Commentary Magazine*. https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/ksmithnypostcom/hard-untruths-ta-nehisi-coates/.

Spillers, Hortense. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17 (2):64-81. https://www.jstor.org/stable/464747?seq=1.

Swaine, Jon, Oliver Laughland, Jamiles Lartey, and Ciara McCarthy. 2015. "Young Black Men Killed by US Police at Highest Rate in Year of 1.134 Deaths." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/ dec/31/the-counted-police-killings-2015-young- black-men.

Terrefe, Selamawit. 2016. "What Exceeds the Hold? An Interview with Christina Sharpe." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29. http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/terrefe.html.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Warren, Calvin. 2016. "Black Care." *Liquid Blackness: Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness* 3 (6):36-50.

_____. 2018. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

West, Cornel. 2017. "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/17/ta-nehisi-coates-neoliberal-black-struggle-cornel-west.

Eva Puyuelo Ureña |

Young, Harvey. 2010. *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Eva Puyuelo Ureña is a lecturer and predoctoral researcher at ADHUC—Research Center for Theory, Gender, Sexuality, at the Universitat de Barcelona (Spain). Eva graduated with honors in English Studies at the University of Barcelona (2011-2015) and also holds an MA in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities (2015-2016). Since 2016 she has been working on her PhD dissertation, which explores the ways in which Ta-Nehisi Coates's representation of racial violence in *Between the World and Me* (2015) can be considered a violent act in itself, and she has also been delivering seminars at an international level and publishing on US policing, intersectional feminism, social movements, and identity politics. Her most recent publications include "Overpoliced and Underprotected: Racialized Gendered Violence(s) in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015)," which sheds light into the ways policing is shaped not only by racist, but also sexist discriminatory practices, "Between Hopelessness and Despair: Afropessimism and Black Nihilism in Ta-Nehisi Coates's Works," and "A Lot More Deadly: Gender and the Black Spatial Imaginary in U.S. Prison Writings," which gathers the results of her participation in the research project "Troubling Houses: Dwellings, Materiality, and the Self in American Literature" (FFI2017-82692-P MINECO/AEI/FEDER, UE).

DIALOGICALLY DESTABILIZING DISCOURSES OF POWER/KNOWLEDGE IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*[1]

Zebulah Baldwin
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a structural, rhetorical, and dialogical analysis of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, arguing that attention to the ways in which contested terms, multi-valent tropes, and ambiguous symbols illustrate the functions of power/knowledge discourses allows for a new understanding of the novel's representation of how mid-Century American society produced and policed hierarchized subjects and structures of domination. This analysis looks at how Ellison's representations of race and African American culture are positioned within popular discourses and stereotypes in a way that draws attention to questions of authenticity and imposture, and reads the novel's representation of the protagonist's disillusioning journey as a counter to the conventional ideological determinations of the genre of the coming-of-age story, arguing for a fundamental rethinking the protagonist's ostensible quest for "visibility." This paper illustrates some of the major conceptual congruences between thematic and rhetorical aspects of Ellison's novel and the discourse theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault, and demonstrates the purchase of this analysis through examining the conflict over the meaning of the terms "boy" and "brother" in the novel, and unpacking the paradoxical complexity of the network of cultural-historical materials that construct the identity of the elderly African American couple whose belongings fill the snow-covered Harlem street in the "dispossession" scene.
Keywords: Ellison; Foucault; Bakhtin; Invisible Man; Discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Is a "boy" really just a boy? What does it mean when a man you have just met calls you his "brother?" When and where are these forms of address operable as performatives and what kinds of performances do they require? Why are mere words powerful enough to shape who we are? And who polices the limits of these terms and conditions? Addressing the significance of these questions for an understanding of the narrative complexity of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* will require a critical approach that unites thematic analysis and cultural history with an examination of the rhetorical, structural, and dialogical aspects of the text, and I locate this approach in the

---

[1] Dedicated to the memory of Morris Dickstein.

intersection of close reading and the discourse theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault. Reading the structural conflicts and "hidden polemics" within the narrative as theorizations of power/knowledge discourses will allow us to appreciate another dimension of the novel's radically unstable social vision and show us how its politics—especially its conceptualizations of how race, culture, and subjects are formed and how these forms are contested—must be understood as a function of its theory of the power of language.

Many formalist[2] readings of Ellison's text have evoked Stanley Fish's distinction between "rhetorical" and "dialectical" novels, suggesting that *Invisible Man* be understood as an example of the later for its pervasive engagement with subjects that disturb the reader's assumptions, thereby characterizing the novel's narrative structure as fundamentally subversive.[3] Other attempts to characterize the novel as a whole have largely centered upon a single trope or theme—Robert Stepto (1987) argues that Brother Tarp's broken leg shackle is the "master trope" of the novel; Horace Porter (2001) suggests the novel be characterized by its "jazz aesthetics;" Julia Sun-Joo Lee explores the possibility that the novel is imbued with "minstrel aesthetics;" A. Timothy Spaulding (2004) reads the novel's narrative form as embodying a "bebop aesthetic;" and Christopher Shinn (2002) proposes that we understand the text in terms of its "carnival poetics." However, most critical work on the formal properties of the novel is typically centered on the question of Ellison's literary style (particularly, the problem of individual expression and group representation), and work on the novel's generic dimensions has typically reflected Robert Bone's (1965) analysis of the novel's "tragicomic sensibility" and its "picaresque" hero, and has tended to analyze these

---

[2] A word on "formalism:" the kinds of formalist readings that I develop here (and that I build upon) do not adhere to New Critical values (looking for the "autonomous text" or the unified tension of managed ambiguities), but instead aspire to read formal aspects of texts in terms of their function within larger social struggles over meaning, without necessarily searching for the kinds of stable binary codes of opposed terms dear to literary Structuralists.

[3] A text, Fish writes in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, "is rhetorical if it satisfies the needs of its readers," since this form serves to "mirror and present for approval the opinions its readers hold," whereas a dialectical text is "disturbing," in that "it requires of its readers a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by" and asks "that its readers discover the truth for themselves" (1972, 1-2). For two seminal arguments characterizing the narrative of *Invisible Man* as triumphantly subversive, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1989) and Houston Baker, Jr. (1984).

properties in terms of the intersection of the pastiche techniques of Euro-American modernism and the cultural heritage of African American folk stories.[4]

Many scholars have engaged with the novel's rich array of contending voices, but analysis of the nature of this conflict is often subsumed within historical, aesthetic, or psychological readings that make no attempt to theorize what the structure of discursive conflicts itself might signify. Lloyd Brown, for example, argues that "generally... the role of rhetoric in *Invisible Man* is to illuminate the conflict between opposing values and experiences," and he maps the style of each "exhorter" in the novel onto a specific historical or ideological position (1970, 299). Berndt Ostendorf asserts that the function of vernacular speech in the novel (in contrast with so-called "standard" English) is "a working out of social and cultural conflicts," concluding that Ellison's "experimental" technique must be read as establishing only "temporary and transient" meanings (1988, 106, 95). Horace Porter observes that the novel is "loud" (like New York City, its primary setting), celebrating the text's "extravaganza of sounds . . . voices, idioms, and accents . . . sermons, speeches, folk rhymes, advertising slogans, [and] profanities shouted on Harlem streets," concluding that Ellison's ability to "riff" on literary and cultural themes, his virtuosic "philosophical flights of fancy," make him a "metaphysical rebel" who should be held at a remove "from all forms of ideological categorization" (2001, 76, 74, 90). Likewise, Gerald Gordon analyzes the ways that differing linguistic registers are both conflicting and interwoven throughout the novel—the language of the street is set against the language of power brokers, but also humor exists within pathos, vague sorrow and nostalgia amidst trauma, playfulness amidst chaos—but all with an eye towards delineating the stylistic debt that Ellison owes to Ernest Hemingway (1987).

Valery Smith (2004) offers a persuasive account of how the narrative structure can be read in terms of the protagonist's psychological development as an emerging artist—providing my argument with the imperative to analyze how "his experiences

---

[4] In this vein, see also Schafer and Rovit in Reilly (1970).

teach him that the act of naming is linked inextricably to issues of power and control"—but her focus on pursuing a psychological reading of the protagonist precludes the possibility of extending this insight into the function of language and power into a wider conceptual terrain (Smith 2004, 27). For example, Smith suggests that Tod Clifton's death and the protagonist's impromptu oration at the funeral "precipitates the invisible man's thorough and lasting reexamination of himself and his relation to authority and ideology," but, I argue, the complex nature of how the narrative structure of the novel itself conceives of (or "theorizes," so to speak) the nature of authority and ideology is something that can be glimpsed even in the novel's earliest chapter and can be fully understood only in relation to discursive conflicts that transcend individual speakers (Smith 2004, 38). Christopher Diller (2014) provides a compellingly fresh take on reading the novel's generic dimensions, arguing that many aspects of *Invisible Man* are structured by a "not-so-Hidden subtext that simultaneously depends and signifies on some of the central tropes and assumptions of the sentimental novel," but his focus is primarily on Ellison's re-deployment of generic conventions in order to "[forge] white moral accountability" (490, 496).

Of recent scholarship on the novel, Johnnie Wilcox's "Black Power: Minstrelsy and Electricity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (2007) and Lesley Larkin's chapter on Ellison in her *Black Literature from James Weldon Johnson to Percival Everett* (2015) come closest to exploring the kind of critical approach I pursue here. Through an analysis of the trope of electricity, Wilcox argues for a reading of the protagonist as a proto-cyborg, suggesting that the theoretical models of Deleuze and Guattari open up the possibility of understanding how the novel teaches that "blackness is a network effect, more the product of connections between inorganic and organic systems than the result of the innate essence or autonomous behavior of those bodies [that are named "Black"]" (Wilcox 2007, 1003). Providing the useful caution that that racism is never a monolithic force and that "race" must always be treated as a suspect term—similar in kind to Barbara and Karen Fields' insistence, in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2014), that we must remember to recognize that race is not an explanation for anything; it is one of the things that needs to be explained—Wilcox

demonstrates the necessity of thinking through the contexts and interconnections that constitute every particular "racial formation" or act of "racial desiring" in the novel (2007, 988). Much like his attempt to delineate the "ensemble" of elements within the episode of racist violence from which the protagonist derived his self-identification as an "invisible man" in the novel's prologue, I endeavor to demonstrate how discourse theory provides a means of analyzing other narratologically significant moments of social conflict (such as the protagonist's fight with Brother Maceo in the bar or his confrontations with Ras), moments in which the black/white binary structure of American racial formations is not the determining factor, but something *structurally similar* is.

Through a parallel kind of focus on what she describes as "transaction[s] with audiences at scenes of racialization," Larkin analyzes structural and rhetorical aspects of the novel in order to counter new-Liberal attempts to "universalize" (i.e., deracinate) the novel's significance,[5] and she productively extends the above mentioned work on the novel's contending voices while rejecting the relativizing conclusions many critics have drawn. For example, while Herman Beavers looks at narrative conflicts and instabilities and suggests that *Invisible Man*'s political agenda can be encapsulated in the way that the novel "dramatizes the politics of interpretation" (2004, 193), Larkin argues that "the unwieldy speech situations Ellison renders not only warn readers against final interpretations but also contribute to a linguistic theory that foregrounds context and audience participation in the production of racial meanings" (Larkin 2015, 96, 94). Larkin also provides my argument with the crucial insight that racial discourse in the novel is not something that should be glossed over in search of some putatively "universal" or transcendent meaning. In fact, quite the opposite: we must learn to

---

[5] Some examples of these "universalizing reading projects:" Robert Bone sees the "invisibility" of blackness in the novel as a metaphor for the condition of the "individual" in the "machine age" (1965, 197); Robert O'Meally suggests that "Invisibility is a metaphor that has moved from its original literary context to become a key metaphor for its era" (1988, 2); Horace Porter writes that "Invisibility, Ellison's modernist theme, characterizes the anonymity of modern life" (2001, 76); and Albert Murray asserts that *Invisible Man* is "a proto-typical story about being not only a twentieth century American but also a twentieth century man, the Negro's obvious predicament symbolizing everybody's essential predicament" (1990, 167).

appreciate the novel's insistence that racial discourse is itself a meaningful force, since it is something that "operates in, through, and on psychology, culture, and the body," and therefore we must come to appreciate "the role of racialization in the development of selfhood at public, private, and aesthetic scenes of reading–including the scene of reading in which [Ellison's] readers are immediately engaged" (102). With our eyes on the contextual and transactional nature of literary meaning, let us now explore how these kinds of insights and approaches can bring to light new dimensions of Ellison's multidimensional novel.

"BOY" VS. "BOY"

The novel's first chapter, the "Battle Royal," not only introduces the nightmarish mental and physical contortions required of African Americans living under Jim Crow, it introduces the structure that constitutes the narrative (between the prologue and epilogue), in which the narrator's retrospective commentary is juxtaposed against descriptions of the naïve protagonist's experiences.[6] Simultaneously conjuring Booker T. Washington's accommodationist stance in the protagonist's speech ("cast down your buckets where you are") and evoking the disciplinary brutality brought down upon the backs of enslaved people in the narrator's commentary ("my back felt as though it had been beaten with wires"), this scene dialogically[7] outlines the themes of Black leadership, political strategy, Jim Crow segregation, artistic representation, and cultural self-definition that pervade the novel, as many critics have noted (29). The predominant critical focus on these overtly political themes, however, is not prepared to address the interpretive problem that is hidden in plain sight here—both within and on the very

---

[6] While it has become conventional to refer to him simply as the Invisible Man, I believe that his narratologically dual nature in the novel is significant, so I maintain a differentiation between the *protagonist* (who undergoes the action of the novel) and the *narrator* (who reflects on the action with a retrospective point of view).

[7] While many critics have argued that *Invisible Man* is *dialectically* structured, and Fredrick Jameson has claimed that Bakhtinian dialogical analysis is essentially indistinguishable from orthodox Marxist dialectics (1981, 84), in this paper I adhere to Robert Young's assertion that, in Bakhtin's thinking, "dialogism cannot be confused with dialectics [because] dialogism cannot be resolved; it has no teleology. It is unfinalizable and open ended" (Young 1985, 76). For analysis of how Ellison's "experimental" aesthetics is characterized by its celebration of the "open ended" play of differences, see: Ostendorf (1988, 95) and Wright (2005).

surface of the racial caste system that constitutes the cultural field of the Battle Royal—the problem of (representational) naming and (racial) terminology.

This chapter features the term "boy"[8] thirty-eight times in its eighteen pages, the first ten appearing in the represented thoughts of the protagonist before it then appears in the mouths of the (white) spectators. Significantly, these first ten appearances of the term all appear to function *literally* (to describe young, male characters), but the eleventh appearance—"'See that boy over there?' one of the [white spectators] said. 'I want you to run across at the bell and give it to him right in the belly. If you don't get him, I'm going to get you'"—bristles with the charged atmosphere of ferocious racism in which this "entertainment" exists, a charge that quickly becomes the outburst "let me at that big nigger!" before the fight has even begun (21).[9] In all, fifteen of the instances of the term "boy" appear in this latter, figurative (i.e., racist) sense, creating what appears to be a near even division between the two senses of the term. The chapter closes, however, in a dream sequence in which the protagonist is instructed to read an "official envelope stamped with the state seal," and, confronting the contents of the prize letter he believes to be a ticket to some kind of respectable social position, he discovers instead that it reads "To Whom It May Concern [...] Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (33).

The disturbing clarity of this final phrase, in which "boy" is structurally analogous with "nigger," would seem to dovetail with the allegorical structure of the entire episode, in which the protagonist is a pawn in a white-dominated game he is helpless to understand. The attentive reader, however, is beginning to see the price that must be paid for this apparent clarity: in a violent scene in which it is crucial to recognize the difference between a *descriptive* deployment of a term and its *racially-charged*

---

[8] Suggesting an intertextual interpretation of the literary-historical provenance of this term, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reads Ellison's title as a philosophically-charged play on works by Richard Wright: "Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* [are] titles connoting race, self, and presence, [which] Ellison tropes with *Invisible Man*, with invisibility as an ironic response of absence to the would-be presence of blacks and natives, while man suggests a more mature and stronger status than either son or boy" (1989, 125).

[9] Of the sixteen times that the N-word appears in the novel, five are spoken by white, male spectators in this short scene, underscoring the discursive structure of white supremacy that orients the "the most important men of the town" (Ellison 1952, 18).

deployment as an instantiation of a discourse of power, the readerly experience of locating a meaning—for the trope as well as the episode—is only available within the experience of reading through/against conflicting representations. The tension between the literal and figurative meanings of "boy" in this scene thus serves as a point of entry into understanding the novel's overarching structure of sustained conceptual conflicts, conflicts which both incorporate and transcend individual voices. Thus, from its very beginning, the novel is dialogically structured by interpretive conflicts which encourage readers to see how apparently "neutral"[10] terms like "boy" can be implicated in the functioning of power, to see the ways that racial ideologies operate with almost invisible impunity in certain institutional contexts, and to better understand how discourses, norms, and power structures function to propel and police the forms of socialization that the protagonist must undergo.

DISCURSIVE CONFLICT AS NARRATIVE STRATEGY

Many critics have noted that meaning in *Invisible Man* is unsettled by the incessant instabilities in the narrative text itself, and one critic has remarked that, in confronting the complexities of Ellison's novel, he could not shake off the feeling that he was "engaged in [analyzing] a discourse which actively verged on discrediting itself" (Nadel 1988, xii).[11] Observing this tendency on another register, Kenneth Warren argues that "*Invisible Man* proceeds by allowing its multiple voices to reach their fullest amplitudes, only to deflate them with irony or demystification" (2003, 106), and Elliot Butler-Evans suggests that even the "privileged" voice of the narrator is not immune from this kind of ironic destabilization, since "the dialogic nature of the narrative often leads to a subversion of that point of view" (1995, 127). If we consider the possibility that it is

---

[10] While there is clearly a significant difference between the two meanings of "boy" here, Bakhtin argues that no word can simply "exist in a neutral or impersonal language," since it has always already existed "in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" (1981, 294).

[11] Similarly, Thomas Schaub finds Ellison's novel to be "a prolonged dramatic discourse upon the ambivalence of the word" (1991, 105), while Lawrence Chisolm suggests that Ellison "puts words under the pressure of experience and raises the pressure until the words become unstable" (1974, 31).

discursive stability itself that is being "discredited" here, we may then be led to ask different questions about how the novel conceives of discourses in general—and why this discrediting is necessary.[12] In what follows, I argue that these apparent rhetorical instabilities are not simply *dysfunctional* (i.e., interpretive hazards, or "snares"[13]), they are *functionally constitutive* and politically significant aspects of how the text destabilizes the racial ideologies that organize the power-knowledge discourses facilitating the protagonist's socialization. Strategic ambiguity—dual-functioning tropes and concepts—is thus understood as a politically-significant discursive conflict staged at the level of readerly interpretation.

The significant influence of history—both literary and racial/political—on Ellison's text is well established. Many critics have commented on Ellison's relation to his literary "ancestors" in terms of T. S. Eliot's theory of literary history in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and comments on Ellison's interest in pursuing a subtler form of "protest" in his art frequently follow up on to his suggestion that "[i]t might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before" (Ellison 1964, 137). However, more narrowly focused critical work on the nature of the narrative itself, particularly concerning its use of conflicting voices as a structuring principle, is largely indebted to the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker Jr., as these two critics inaugurated the possibility of reading Ellison's text as polyphonic.[14] Gates, Jr.'s attention to Ellison's novel is largely in service of delineating "Signifying" as a theory of African American literary history—analyzing *Invisible Man*'s relation to Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ishmael Reed—but he provides an important insight into how Bakhtin's concept of the "hidden polemic"[15] opens up the possibility of understanding

---

[12] As Dale Peterson notes in "Response and Call: The African American Dialogue with Bakhtin and What It Signifies," it is important to remember that, in Bakhtin's analysis of dialogical narrative relativity or "polyphony," there is no "sympathy for the radical Deconstructionist move toward 'the endless play of signifiers,'" since linguistic utterances are always understood to be socially positioned and resonant with historical contexts (1993, 762)

[13] In *S/Z*, Barthes defines "snares" as one of the "hermeneutic codes" of a literary text, suggesting that these deceptive symbols and/or descriptions function to avoid or defer the ultimate revelation of truth by insinuating a kind of rhetorical chicanery into what otherwise appears to be a revelation of narrative truth (Barthes 1974).

[14] See Gates (1989) and Baker (1984).

[15] "In hidden polemic the author's discourse is oriented toward its referential object, as is any other discourse, but at the same time each assertion about that object is constructed in such a way that, besides its referential meaning, the

how Ellison's novelistic language must be read as always already "populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (Bakhtin 1981, 294). While Gates and Baker ultimately read Ellison's dialogism as producing a fundamentally subversive perspective on the discourses it engages, I am more interested in exploring dialogism's essentially open-ended nature by extending this type of Bakhtinian approach through the addition of the discourse theory of Michel Foucault. In this way, I argue that the novel's many structures of conflicting "intentions"—both within individual tropes and episodes, as well as between speakers and narrative levels—can be read as functioning to facilitate a conceptualization of how power/knowledge discourses work.

Additionally, Ellison's novel, I suggest, elaborates a theory of subject formation that is conceptually parallel in many ways with Michel Foucault's notion of how power-knowledge discourses not only work *on* us as we are, but *make* us what we are, and thus we can read Ellison's text as facilitating a conceptualization of what resistance to the policing function of social norms looks like once the "repressive hypothesis"[16] no longer reigns supreme. In the following section I will demonstrate the purchase of this approach through examining two aspects of Ellison's novel that have received very little scholarly attention to date: the conflict over the meaning of the term "brother" throughout the novel, and the paradoxical complexity of the network of cultural-historical materials that construct the identity of the African American couple whose belongings fill the snow-covered Harlem street in the "dispossession" scene.

DISCOURSES OF DOMINATION

Since the fundamental outlines of Foucault's analysis of the disciplinary mechanisms of surveillance and the "productive" role of power-knowledge discourses are too well-

---

author's discourse brings a polemical attack to bear against another speech act, another assertion, on the same topic. Here one utterance focused on its referential object clashes with another utterance on the grounds of the referent itself" (Bakhtin 1971, 87).

[16] This phrase, the title of Part Two of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, refers to the (mistaken) conventional wisdom that social structures are exclusively maintained through top-down "repressive" practices of restriction and prohibition.

known to require recapitulation here, I will begin by orienting the purchase of this approach around the relevant interpretive problematic by touching upon a few of the structural and thematic aspects of Ellison's novel that are conceptually congruent with Foucauldian discourse theory. In each novelistic episode, each chapter of the protagonist's coming-of-age journey, the deep structure of the protagonist's struggle for self-determination is centered on the conflict between his desire to strategically actualize his grandfather's ambiguous advice—"overcome [the enemy] with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction" (16)—and the problematic nature of actually performing this "agreement" while positioned within the historical forces that conspire to keep him "running" (in place) after illusions.[17] It is this deep structure of conflicted consent within the protagonist's every perception of every choice that allows *Invisible Man* to move its conceptualization of domination and resistance beyond what Foucault refers to as "the repressive hypothesis." Nowhere is Foucault's assertion that a disciplinary regime functions by producing subjects who are "caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (1977, 210) more clearly illustrated than in the invisible man's gut-wrenching realization at the end of the novel that "you carry part of your sickness within you," a realization that, through the second-person pronoun, appears to implicate the reader as readily as the speaker implicates himself in the terrible knowledge that, once you have shed the illusions that support the social roles you have been prescribed,

> you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. *That* is the real soul-sickness, the spear in the side, the drag by the neck through the

---

[17] Due to space constraints, I am unable to engage here with the other subject that is most frequently associated with discussions of the Grandfather, namely the narrator's statements in the Epilogue that we might "affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men" (574). While many commentators are content to read this as a pro-democracy sentiment—a sentiment that is in accord with many of Ellison's own comments and commitments—the political vision of the novel itself is considerably more ambivalent, even within the narrator's own statements in this epilogue, which do little more than invite the reader to wrestle with this thorny subject. For analysis of conflicting interpretations of this "principle," see Steven Ealy (2016, 272-3).

> mob-angry town, the Grand Inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip in the belly with the guts hanging out ..." (575; emphasis in original)

The profusion of powerful metaphors here underscores how heavily this knowledge weighs upon the protagonist's mind, and while many critics have emphasized the "eyes who look through you unseeingly" in this pivotal insight, what interests me here—what is, in fact, tearing the narrator apart inside—is the "blame." Not only has he come to realize by the end of the novel that he had been "a tool at the very moment [he] had thought [himself] free," he has emerged from the recurrent travails that set him "running" with the knowledge that the mechanisms that produced him as a "tool" were only able function by orchestrating his consent—his will to cooperate, his desire to succeed in the terms of the dominant regime—which we might read as illustrating Foucault's assertion that power produces effects at the level of desire (553).[18]

Recognizing the centrality of the problem of consent in the novel suggests that we rethink the now-common assumption that the protagonist is driven by the aspiration to be seen, to be rendered "visible," even if only in the eyes of readers.[19] Describing his "irresponsible" hibernation in the prologue as an unwillingness to become beholden to any social regime—in terms that suggest we must understand this rejection vis-à-vis his grandfather's advice—he states that "responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement" (14). Crucially, both for our analysis of the protagonist's self-understanding and our ability to conceptualize the theoretical implications of the novel as a whole, the suggestion here is that, not only has he discovered the trapdoor beneath his grandfather's "curse"—rendered in the Epilogue as the realization that "by pretending to agree [he] had indeed agreed" (553)—the narrator

---

[18] Foucault writes that, because a power-knowledge discourse "produces effects at the level of desire," the subject may believe that they are using social structures to achieve their chosen ends, when the subject is actually carrying out the dictates of the social discourse, both in the structure of their desires and actions taken to fulfill them (1980, 59).

[19] For paradigmatic arguments on this point, see, for example: Robert Bone's argument that Ellison's novel succeeds in making blackness "visible" (1965, 197), Klein's assertion that "it is the function of every episode [of the novel] to confirm the fact that this black man is condemned to a hopeless struggle to be seen" (1970, 112), and Daryl Michael Scott's suggestion that ultimately, "Ellison's protagonist triumphed" because, as a "now visible man," he has "developed a positive individual identity" (1997, 168).

has come to understand the profound implications of Foucault's theory that "recognition" may only be available for a subject through the terms established by the very regime of truth that holds them in a dominated position; in other words, "visibility is a trap" (1977, 200).

The ultimate significance of how *Invisible Man* moves beyond a simple "repressive" concept of power (and towards a concept of policing that locates domination within discursive structures and social norms) can be located in how this conceptual move leads to a profound shift in the way that resistance to domination is understood. When we come to conceive of power as a structure of discourses that are not merely *external* to the subject but *constitute* it as such, *bound* it, and *meet* it at every point where it encounters the social order, we may also come to understand, Foucault writes, that "discourses are not 'once and for all' subservient to power" because there is a "complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1978, 101). What I will attempt to illustrate in the following analyses of the tropes and terms that produce the characters in the novel as social subjects—the terms that constitute individuals as "brothers" and/or as "Black"—is that this radical refiguration of policing as a discourse enables the subject to actualize their agency in a way that is as subtle as it is significant; since tropes and terms are no longer understood to be simply passive or neutral—that is, merely external to the subject's "true" essence—then the ability to confront, critique, or even contradict these terms becomes of paramount importance: where there is discourse, there is power, and, as Foucault contends, "where there is power, there is resistance" (95).

"BROTHER" VS. "BROTHER"

The term "brother" appears an incredible six hundred and seventy-three times in the novel: three hundred and twenty-four times as a stand-alone noun, two hundred and thirty-eight times as part of a character's institutional title (e.g. "Brother Jack"), and an additional one hundred and eleven times in the name of the Marxist organization the

"Brotherhood."[20] Clearly, this is a remarkable number of recurrences, even within a long novel, but the question emerges: *how* does the immense quantity of recurrences impact the term's function over the course of the novel, does the term accumulate clarity or, like a form of currency, does it lose value through inflation? I argue that not only is this latter proposition the case, but this is precisely the point: the over-saturation of the text with a performative term achieves the wearing away of the "natural" appearance of performativity as a form of social cohesion.

Deployed exclusively in its figurative sense throughout the novel, the term "brother" contains a variety of potential functions as a kinship metaphor, but the ones that concern us here are its performative function as a signal of inclusion in the African American community or as a signal of inclusion in the Marxist organization the "Brotherhood." Clearly, the age-old theoretical conflict over the primacy of race or class is dialogically staged by the novel at the level of the term through which both competing forms of alliance might be performatively constructed. Far from simply suggesting their equivalence, however, the novel's double-voiced deployment of this term suggests (racial) "brotherhood" and (class/political) "Brotherhood" exist in a state of irresolvable tension, each vying for primacy, and each succeeding and failing in differing contexts. But it is less the *fact* of this tension than its *location* that is significant: by locating the problem of membership[21] within a conflicted performative speech act (that may or may not succeed), *Invisible Man* suggests that social symbolic action (calling someone "brother") is both the result of an individual's identity *and* a force that contributes to the formation of that identity, thereby implying that identity is inherently unstable and continuously redefined through speech acts and symbolic communication.

---

[20] The capitalization of the term (when not used in a title) is, as far as I can tell, completely unsystematic and varies even within an individual speakers' usage during single conversations (the confrontation in the Harlem bar late in the novel is a case in point).

[21] Further complicating the problem of allegiance, the novel suggests that membership (as identity) is not necessarily consciously chosen: walking in upon a union meeting at Liberty Paints, the narrator reflects, "it was as though by entering the room I had automatically applied for membership"—a membership that was thrust upon him by circumstance (222). Later, greeted by a couple of passing "zoot-suiters" he realizes "It was as though by dressing and walking in a certain way I had enlisted in a fraternity in which I was recognized at a glance—not by features, but by clothes, by uniform, by gait" (485). I will return to this analysis of the power of circumstance below in my discussion of Rinehartism.

Significantly, the meaning of the term in the novel (its functional value as a form of linguistic currency) is repeatedly rendered confused and depicted as an explicit site of contestation, underscoring Bakhtin's notion that a literary discourse is never simply reducible to its "referential" function, since it "finds the object at which it [is] directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, [and] already enveloped in an obscuring mist" (1981, 276). Furthermore, within *Invisible Man*'s dialogical deployment of the term "brother" (as a discourse of cultural/institutional inclusion), it is possible to detect what Bakhtin refers to as the novel's "participation in historical becoming and social struggle," the fact that literary discourses are always "still warm from that [social-historical] struggle and hostility, [and] still fraught with hostile intentions and accents" (331). In this spirit, we might note here that, the term "brother" also conjures the political valences of the contemporary railroad-worker's union known as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—both a race and class-based alliance simultaneously—and evokes the concerns of the popular depression-era Broadway show tune "Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?" But, to suggest that Ellison is simply signifying on the popular contemporary resonances of the term "brother" does nothing to resolve the complex function it serves within the novel, since, in addition to the question of reading the literal meaning against the figurative or the historical against the novelistic, there is the question of how the use of this term functions (or fails to function) in each instance of its deployment to "position"[22] the protagonist within the structures of social belonging that attend this term's performative functions when it is used to "hail" a putative member of the "B/brotherhood."

The simmering conflict within the deployment of the term "brother" comes to a head at two important points in the novel, the first of which occurs on the streets of Harlem when the militant Black nationalist character Ras the Exhorter condemns the protagonist's involvement with the Brotherhood, declaring "Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men brother?" (370) Through Ras' attempt to

---

[22] I use this term in the sense Stuart Hall develops in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," to which I will return to below.

use the concept of racial authenticity to police the boundaries of the term's meaning, the novel explicitly dramatizes the link between the problem of identity and the problem of allegiance that lies at the heart of the conflict over the divergent ways that the term can function—for, the narrative asks, is "brotherhood" something to be chosen or something to be born into, and who is/not granted the privilege of choice? In this way, the novel represents the term "brother" as the terrain upon which the protagonist's status as a social subject is formed and contested, opening up the possibility of seeing how this status is not necessarily established in advance (and then merely described or modified through its representation in discourse), but is produced and contested within the terrain of discursive representation itself.

The second explicit instance in which the conflict over the meaning of "brotherhood" comes to a head occurs when the protagonist, who is now a well-known representative of the Brotherhood, attempts to greet some fellow (Black) patrons in a bar in Harlem. "Good evening, Brothers," the protagonist cheerfully offers, but the other patrons disdainfully repulse his attempt at friendliness, disparage him for getting "white fever," and begin asking each other sarcastically if the protagonist is *literally* one of their kin. "I wouldn't be his kin even if I was," one hostile patron says to the other—refusing both the literal and the figurative meanings of the term—thereby destabilizing the protagonist's ability to mobilize either performative function of the term and effectively revoking his discursive status as a member of the black community (423-4). This hostile refusal of performativity fundamentally destabilizes one of the structures of meaning that the novel itself has previously mobilized, making even the protagonist's previously uncontested ability to claim racial solidarity into something conditional that might be resisted or even revoked at will (275).[23]

While the protagonist eventually rejects his position within the Brotherhood—after realizing their plan to manipulate the Black citizens of Harlem into

---

[23] A similar destabilization of the cultural solidarity of Black "brotherhood" occurs in the novel-ending riot scene where, fleeing from Ras's militant black nationalist thugs, the protagonist suggests that the simple bond of racial solidarity is no longer available to him, even to save his own life: "If only I could turn around and drop my arms and say, 'Look, men, give me a break, we're all black folks together . . .'" (560).

fighting a race riot, he declares to Ras "I am no longer their brother"—what the novel accomplishes is much more radical than a mere repudiation of membership in one organization in favor of another; it is a disavowal of the fundamental nature of discursive membership as a mode of social belonging, a disavowal emblematized in the ritualistic emptying of his prized calfskin briefcase and burning of his identification cards in the novel's closing scene (557). The narrative arc of the novel, with its series of indoctrinations and disavowals, is thus analogous with the structure of this conflict over the meaning of "brotherhood:" through the significance of this central conflict of allegiance, staged at the level of the term which would performatively establish him as one kind of "brother" or another, the novel offers a radical (in the root sense) reassessment of the nature and conditions of socialized subjectivity itself, moving away from the binary structure of the dominant racial ideology (and the attendant "repressive hypothesis") and towards a model of subjectivity that hinges on the contingent and performative nature of discourses. In this way, *Invisible Man* refuses the ideological prescriptions of its own generic form as a coming-of-age novel,[24] and it does so while refiguring the concept of what constitutes domination, moving away from the binary logic of the "repressive hypothesis" and, as we will see in the following scenes, towards a concept of domination that functions through the policing power of ever-present norms. Through a close reading of the dialogical structure of the protagonist's insights and the symbolic structure through which the identity of the old Black couple is constructed in the dispossession scene we will begin to see the extent to which the novel is invested in representing the instability of all discourses.

---

[24] I have written elsewhere of the ways that the protagonist's ineradicable desire for individuality and self-determination (and the eventual choice to shed all prescribed social roles in favor of individuality and "invisibility") runs directly against the grain of the *Bildungsroman*, and I argue that this can be read as an "immanent critique" of the ideological determinations of the genre (See Baldwin 2013).

POSITIONED IN DISPOSSESSION

Typically analyzed in terms of its function as a pivotal moment in the protagonist's development as a speechmaker, for my argument, the significance of the dispossession scene is best understood in relation to the scene that immediately precedes it in the narrative. After an explosion at Liberty Paints lands him in the "factory hospital" where he is "treated" by some form of electro-lobotomy, the protagonist has a break down on a Harlem street and is taken in by Mary Rambo, a maternal Black character who is constantly trying to turn him into a "race man" that will lead his people towards social advancement. Resisting Mary's attempts to dissolve his identity into the ranks of upstanding Black citizens—people like Mary, he thinks, "seldom know where their personalities end and yours begins; they think in terms of 'we'" —he aimlessly wanders the streets of Harlem, reflecting on how his anonymity in New York City affords him the chance to reflect critically on his inherited culture and inclinations (316). Meeting a dialect-speaking old Black southerner selling yams and dispensing wisdom—that is, meeting an over-determined "folk" stereotype that nonetheless wisely warns him "everything what looks good ain't necessarily good"—the protagonist stumbles upon a pivotal insight into the nature and function of social propriety (264).

Walking the street and eating his hot, buttered yam at the same time—an act he understands to be unquestionably improper—the protagonist is suddenly "overcome by an intense feeling of freedom" as he realizes that, here, on the streets of Harlem, he "no longer had to worry about who saw [him] or what was proper" (264). Freedom, here, is directly tied to an individualist conception of self-determination. He then contemplates how the upstanding southern Black college chancellor Dr. Bledsoe might lose all his hard-won social prestige simply by the public revelation that he enjoyed eating chitterlings.[25] Reflecting on the close ties between decorum, race, and class standing, the protagonist imagines that this public humiliation would cause Dr. Bledsoe to "drop

---

[25] Chitterlings are a food made from pig intestines—one of the "undesirable" cuts of pork that were commonly available to enslaved African Americans in the southern US—that dates from the colonial period and still forms part of what is known as "soul food."

his head in shame" as he would discover that "his white folks would desert him;" not only would he "lose caste," the protagonist thinks, but "weekly newspapers would attack him [with photographs and captions reading] *Prominent Educator Reverts to Field-Niggerism*" (264-5; emphasis in original). Even something as apparently natural and "essential" as gastronomic preferences functions as/within a discourse of power, he realizes, and the stakes involved in conformity and deviance can be extremely high at any point in the network.

And yet, he then realizes that even the ability to critically recognize the policing function of norms does nothing to *actually* liberate him from what he terms the "problem of choice," since, he realizes, inclinations and disinclinations are both social and personal—both self-determined and structures of power—and there is no clear way to differentiate them: "But what of those things which you actually didn't like," he muses, "not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education—but because you actually found them distasteful? . . . How could you know?" (266) Thus, like with every other strategic escape he contemplates in the novel, every "agreement" he knowingly or unknowingly makes for the sake of other ends, the pivotal insight he achieves here is dialogically qualified within the structure of the novel by the fact that *there is always another trap.*[26] The most important point here, however, is that the protagonist's attempt to embrace his southern Black roots—"I yam what I yam!" he triumphantly declares—is dialectically qualified in the narrative by his subsequent awareness of how power produces effects at the level of desire and how racial and class structures are policed though the very desires, humiliations, and stereotypes that construct this presumptive "essence." The provisional and dialectical nature of how these pivotal revelations are structured here offers a key to the interpretation of the dispossession scene that follows.

---

[26] For example, his escape from the world represented by the Battle Royal is to craft an ode to accommodationism, but it lands him in an institution offering something like a "more efficient blinding;" the letter of introduction he receives from Dr. Bledsoe is supposed to open doors, but it turns out to be another ploy to "keep him running;" even the role he achieves as political organizer/orator for the Brotherhood's ostensible struggle to liberate all people turns him into a tool that perpetuates racial disparities.

Located at the novel's midpoint, this brief episode contains a dizzying quantity of symbolic elements by which the identity of the African American couple is constituted, and this produces a representation of the cultural and historical constitution of "blackness" whose complexity is unique in the narrative. It is in the confrontation with this constellation of symbolic elements that the protagonist begins to realize that "it is [the old Black couple's] status as historical subjects, not tenants, that is at stake," as Herman Beavers argues (2006, 196), but it is a realization that complicates his own burgeoning identity as a historical subject as well, since "[the protagonist's] own life is reconstructed through the lives of [his] imaginary forebearers" (Porter 2001, 81).

Approaching a crowd who have come to condemn the injustice of the eviction, in which an old Black couple is being forcibly removed from their home and all of their belongings are being thrown into the snow-covered street, the protagonist makes a series of bumbling assumptions that characterize him as an outsider to this type of harsh urban reality, but he is quickly drawn into the scene as a participant when he begins to scrutinize the "clutter of household objects" that lay at his feet in the snow. Looking at a faded photograph of the old couple from when they were young, the protagonist imagines he can see that "even in that nineteenth-century day they had expected little," and this seems to him to be "both a reproach and a warning" (271). While the nature of the imagined "reproach" and "warning" is never explicitly elaborated, the fact that a perspective from the nineteenth century is interjected into the scene here is significant. Establishing a dialogical perspective on the scene's significance, this "reproach" from the past puts the protagonist's perspective on history and identity in dialogue with the political-historical realities that generated the present scene of dispossession, destabilizing the apparent simplicity of the actions unfolding before him by re-conceiving of them as part of an ongoing process. Thus, more than merely representing "a revelatory gestalt of the moment," as one critic suggests, the symbols that appear in this scene are structured to maintain a focus on the thorny problem of interpretation (Porter 2001, 80). From its very beginning, the symbolic value of the scene is anchored in a racial and historical structure that is relativized by its location in a dialogical

narrative discourse, and this relativity is compounded by contemplations of blackface minstrelsy.

The next "household items" that attract the protagonist's notice are a pair of "knocking bones," which begins to pull the narrative into confrontation with the way that the problem of understanding the nature of race relations in America is tied up with the problem of representation, in both the political and artistic senses: the protagonist imagines that these "crudely carved and polished bones" were probably "used to accompany music at country dances, [or] used in black face minstrels," and he wonders "had [the old man] been a minstrel?" (271). Invoking the history of American minstrelsy, a popular form of live entertainment that was "organized around the quite explicit 'borrowing' of black cultural materials for white dissemination (and profit)," the knocking bones bring the representative aspect of this old Black couple to the fore in a particularly fraught way, because this particular form of representation simultaneously "depended upon the material relations of slavery" for its subject matter, and "obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural" (Lott 1993, 23). Minstrelsy thus formed a discourse that functioned to "contain" the complex racial realities it ostensibly functioned to "explain" (and make palatable to white audiences), and the references to blackface that appear in and around this scene entangle the reader's interpretations of the old Black couple in the fraught issue of representing individual and collective identity through the racial ideologies of popular stereotypes.[27]

Popular for at least a century,[28] blackface minstrel shows depended upon denigrating stereotypes for their wide appeal and comedic effects (employing, for example, figures like the "coon" caricature, representing Black people as dim-witted,

---

[27] References to blackface recur when the protagonist reflects on his escape from the police (he "must have looked… like a black-face comedian," he thinks), and again at his inaugural encounter with the Brotherhood, where a (white) female "brother" looks him over and whispers "don't you think he should be a little blacker?" to which the hero replies (in his mind) "What does she want, a black-face comedian?" (294, 303). Critics have read minstrel tropes into many other aspects of the novel, such as the "abstract mask" of the naked white woman preceding the Battle Royal, the protagonist's antics in that scene, Bledsoe's feigned humility before whites, the electro-shock "dancing" in the hospital scene, Mary's stereotype-l aden coin bank, and Tod Clifton's selling of "Sambo" dolls on the street.

[28] Roughly 1830-1930 (see Lott 1993). However, Ellison himself wrote of the impact that seeing a blackface version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 1940s had upon him (see Diller 2014).

lazy, buffoonish, happy-go-lucky, athletic, and musical, among others), and through the medium of the white audience's laughter these performances of "blackness" effectively naturalized the racial ideologies that they employed (Pilgrim 2000). In other words, through artistic representations on the minstrel stage that denied the equality of Black people, white society could (re)establish the self-evident "truth" of the racist principles upon which equal political representation could be denied to African Americans on the national political stage. Ellison's novel, on the other hand, dialogically complicates the meaning of the stereotypical images it employs—thereby negating the naturalizing function—by introducing a level of self-consciousness and self-contradiction into its symbols.

In this scene, as elsewhere in the novel, the meaning of individual symbols appears to be complicated by the way that they are structured in the narrative: after attending to the old photograph and the "knocking bones," the protagonist's observations assume a double or tripartite structure which seems to simultaneously establish and defer the establishment of the categorical differences that could produce clear and straightforward symbolic resonances. For example, the protagonist notices "an old lace fan studded with jet and mother-of-pearl," evoking a dark/light contrast that is convoluted by rhetoric that requires the reader to slow down and contemplate the variable nature of these tonal qualities in a way that is not simply black/white (271). Next, the protagonist observes in the street "a straightening comb," a "curling iron," and "false hair;" in the next moment, he sees an "Ethiopian flag," a "tintype [photograph] of Abraham Lincoln," and "the smiling image of a Hollywood star" (271). In both of these tripartite clusters of images there is an object of potentially "black" identification (the hair straightening comb; the Ethiopian flag), an object of potentially "white" identification (the hair curling iron; the image of Lincoln), and an object whose racial-cultural character is ambiguous (the nature of the "false hair" is undefined; the color of the Hollywood star is unknown; both images could be made to swing either way in the reader's imagination). Thus, while readers are initially led to read the old couple as members of a single, stable culturally and politically-demarcated group—African Americans—the complex nature of the symbolic clusters though which their identity is

constructed makes it increasingly difficult to determine exactly which aspects of their historical constitution make them *essentially* Black, and which ones, like blackface minstrelsy, constitute a discourse of performance, assumption, or stereotype.

Of the remaining "household items" that litter the snow-covered street, there are several that illustrate the problem of constructing an image of cultural authenticity out of historical artifacts: the protagonist notices the "Free Papers" that released the old man from enslavement in 1859, a collection of the folklore of "High John the Conqueror,"[29] and a "card with a picture of what *looked like* a white man in black-face seated in the door of a cabin strumming a banjo beneath a bar of music and the lyric 'Going back to my old cabin home'" (272; emphasis added). This conjunction of images—one historically concrete, one culturally genuine, and one culturally dubious—combine to produce an ambiguous impression of the old couple as Black Southerners. The image that *should* have served to anchor the symbolic value of the "Free Papers" to the symbolic geography of the South, the card that should have linked the banjo and the "old cabin home" to the material reality of Black history—as minstrelsy attempted to do, in its distorted fashion—becomes impossible to take at face value. While we cannot be absolutely sure that the card actually features a "*white* man in black-face"—since, one imagines, the old couple would surely have preferred a picture of a real, Black banjo player—the narrative's insistence that the racial identity of the man is suspect destabilizes the possibility of conceiving of cultural authenticity in terms of historical appearances alone. Julia Sun-Joo Lee suggests that, in this scene, the Invisible Man finds that he is "torn between the talismanic powers of one set of emblems and another" and his "inner equilibrium is radically destabilized" (2006, 470). But it is equally possible that it is the discourse of Black cultural inheritance that is "radically destabilized" here through its imbrication in the (racist) American ritual of blackface performance. To paraphrase the wise old yam vendor, "everything that looks Black ain't necessarily Black," and the narrative is structured to introduce a "hidden

---

[29] In "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Zora Neale Hurston notes that, like Brer Rabbit and Jack the Bear, John the Conqueror is a "trickster-hero of West Africa [that] has been transplanted to America" (2000, 36).

polemic" into the reader's contemplation of the meaning of blackface for the construction and performance of Black identity.

Ultimately, in addition to the way that the old couple's "status as historical subjects" is at stake in this scene, the way that their identity is symbolically constituted—through a paradoxical structure of discursive artifacts—suggests not that cultural identity for members of the African diaspora is reducible to any one history or "essence," but, as Stuart Hall suggests, "is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth;" diasporic cultural identities, Hall maintains, are "not an essence but a positioning" (1990, 226). The interpretive conflict that the reader experiences in determining the meanings of these "positions" for Black characters—are they actually agreeing or merely performing their agreement?—underscores the novel's insistence that the conflict involved in establishing the "historical status" of identity is carried out at the level of the contested terms through which it is described. The fact that Black minstrels—like, perhaps, the old Harlemite being evicted here—participated in, altered, and profited from performances of these monstrously distorted images adds another layer of irony to the paradoxical structure of the way the old man's identity is constructed through a web of conflicted tropes, underscoring Wilcox's assertions that the novel instructs its readers to consider how "blackness" is less an "essence" or a form of "autonomous behavior" than it is "a network effect" (2007, 1003). This reading of the old couple, then, might productively be linked to Gates' reading of the "blackness of blackness" sermon in the novel's prologue, in which Ellison's narrative effects a "critique the received idea of blackness as a negative essence, as a natural, transcendent signified." Implicit in such a critique, Gates goes on to claim in typically elliptical fashion, "is an equally thorough critique of blackness as a presence, which is merely another transcendent signified," concluding that such a critique, therefore, "is a critique of the structure of the sign itself and constitutes a profound critique" (Gates 1989, 245-6). The profound nature of Ellison's critique in this scene, I suggest, lies not only in its critique of the "signs" of Black culture, but also in its insistence that while the network of cultural discourses that make up an African American identity may rest on

problematic and unstable assumptions, they are no less real and meaningful as means of understanding one's position in a problematic and unstable world.

The complex imbrications of authentic cultural inheritance, imposture (or counterfeit performance), and stereotype in the novel's representations of how "blackness" and African American identity are constructed suggests, not that there is simply an essential "true" self that is buried beneath "false" constructions and waiting to be made "visible," but instead that, as Judith Butler would say, all these constructions—essence, authenticity, imposture—must be understood as positions within a larger discourse of power/knowledge, a "regime of truth" (here, the American racial ideologies of white supremacy) which "offers the terms that make self-recognition possible" and "decides what will and will not be a recognized form of being" (2005, 22). Foucauldian discourse theory, then, adds another layer of significance to what Gates reads as Ellison's "implicit critique of the nature of the sign itself, of a transcendent signified, an essence, which supposedly exists prior to its figuration" by allowing for an analysis of this "implicit" linguistic theory in terms of the subject formations and cultural formations within the novel (Gates 1989, 246).

Now, if nothing is essentially stable and nothing is simply "true," it may be tempting to read Rinehart as the figure in the novel who, in his inherent multiplicity, offers a strategy for actualizing the Grandfather's advice and navigating the "vast, seething, hot world of fluidity" by learning to "[hide] right out in the open,"[30] as the Veteran on the bus suggests he must, and, indeed, the protagonist does try "Rinehartism" on for a spell with some success (498, 153-4). Accordingly, John Wright has commented that not only is "Rine the rascal" at home in this "boundaryless" world, he is "the narrative's ultimate image of social mastery" (2006, 118). However, it is worth remembering how the narrator ultimately reflects that, having "caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities" he decides to turn away

---

[30] The Veteran's enigmatic advice that the Invisible Man must learn to "play the game [...] but don't believe in it" would seem to suggest precisely the strategy that Rinehart represents, but, as I argue below, the novel ultimately concludes that even withholding belief cannot protect you from the ravages of a game whose very structure maintains your subjugation (153).

(499). He does so, I will suggest, for a very specific reason—and not, as he declares, simply because "it was too vast and confusing to contemplate"—and that reason is illustrated by the episode in which, dressed as Rinehart, the protagonist sets out to "test" the power of his disguise on Brother Maceo in a Harlem bar. After a bit of banter about pork ribs goes horribly wrong, Maceo reads the protagonist as a violent, razor-wielding hipster, and events quickly spiral out of control, with the protagonist powerless to stop it: "Here I set out to test a disguise on a friend and now I was ready to beat him to his knees—not because I wanted to but because of place and circumstance" (489). In the ensuing violence—in which, much like in the prologue, one person is blinded by how "the construction of their *inner* eyes" leads them to mis-read the other person, and they lash out—the reader comes to understand that roles and disguises are themselves a social force that can exceed the power of personal choice (3; emphasis in original). In other words, Rinehartism may hold out the promise of allowing you to "BEHOLD THE INVISIBLE," as the protean Reverend's handbill advertises, but your attempt to "play the game" will keep you caught up in a power situation of which you are yourself the bearer—like the "boys" who fight each other for meaningless tokens in the Battle Royal—until you realize, in all its painful clarity, that "visibility is a trap" (496).

In this paper I have incorporated Bakhtin's conceptualizations of novelistic dialogism and Foucault's notions of power/knowledge discourses into a close reading of *Invisible Man* in order to demonstrate how these theoretical models open up new ways of understanding Ellison's novel, particularly how the novel conceives of the role of language in subject formation and domination/resistance. Exploring how the narrative structure itself signifies something to the reader (sometimes over the heads of the characters, if you will), I have been concerned less with arguing that the novel is wholly subversive of the discourses it represents than I have been concerned with illustrating the ways that the novel communicates to readers how to understand the nature and function of power/knowledge discourses in general, thereby destabilizing their hegemony by resisting their naturalizing function. Analyzing some of the formal aspects of the novel's radically unstable social vision in terms of Bakhtin's concept of the "hidden polemic" within novelistic language, and reading its politics as a function

of its theory of the performative power of language, has led to a rethinking some of the novel's central conceptual propositions, from the quest for "visibility" to the strategic dissimulations of Rinehartism, and if this analysis has put in check certain utopian impulses in the critical tradition of reading *Invisible Man* as triumphantly carnivalesque, it is in service of emphasizing another form of triumph: the triumph of form over the discourse of interpretive over-determinations that too frequently attend readings of Black literature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baker Jr, Houston A. 1984. Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory. University of Chicago Press.

Bakhtin, M. M. 1971. "Discourse Typology in Prose." In *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, edited by Krystyna Pomorska and Ladislav Matejka, 176-197. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

_____. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Baldwin, Zebulah S. 2013. "Socialization Under Interrogation: Narrative Strategies in Ellison's Counter-Bildungsroman." Masters Thesis: San Francisco State University.

Barthes, Roland. 1974. *S/Z*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Beavers, Herman. 2006. "'Documenting Turbulence: The Dialectics of Chaos in Invisible Man.'" In *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man*, edited by Lucas E. Morel, 193-217. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Bone, Robert. 1965. *The Negro Novel in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Brown, Lloyd W. 1970. "Ralph Ellison's Exhorters: The Role of Rhetoric in Invisible Man." *CLA Journal* 13, (3):289–303.

Butler, Judith. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Butler-Evans, Elliott. 1995. "The Politics of Carnival and Heteroglossia in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: Dialogic Criticism and African American Literature." In *Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, edited by Dance Palumbo-Liu, 117-139. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chisolm, Lawrence W. 1974. "'Signifying Everything.'" In *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by John Hersey, 31–36. London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc.

Conner, Marc C., and Lucas E. Morel. 2016. *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Covo, Jacqueline. 1974. *The Blinking Eye: Ralph Waldo Ellison and His American, French, German, and Italian Critics, 1952-1971; Bibliographic Essays and a Checklist*. Metuchen (NJ): Scarecrow Press.

Diller, Christopher G. 2014. "Signifying on Stowe: Ralph Ellison and the Sentimental Rhetoric of Invisible Man." *Modern Language Quarterly* 75 (4):487–509.

Dundes, Alan. 1973). *Mother Wit from Laughing Barrel*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Eagleton, Terry. 1982. *Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. London: Verso Editions and NLB.

Ealy, Steven. 2016. "Invisible Man's Grandfather and the American Dream." In *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Marc C. Connor and Lucas E. Morel, 260-278. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Ellison, Ralph. 1952. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House.

_____. 1964. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House.

Fields, Karen E., and Barbara Jeanne Fields. 2014. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. Verso Trade.

Fish, Stanley Eugene. 1972. *Self-Consuming Artifacts; the Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

_____. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.

_____. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gates, Henry Louis. 1989. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gordon, Gerald T. 1987. "Rhetorical Strategy in Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man.'" *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 41 (4):199–210.

Hall, Stuart. 2003. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, edited by Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, 233-246. Malden (MA): Blackwell Pub.

Harriss, M Cooper. 2018. "Time, Narrative, and All That Jazz: Ellison, Ricoeur, and Invisibility's Hermeneutic Circle." *Literature and Theology* 32 (4):423–33.

Hurston, Zora Neale. 2003 (1934). "Characteristics of Negro Expression." In *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Winston Napier, 31-44. United Kingdom: NYU Press.

Klein, Marcus. 1970. *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century.* Freeport (NY): Books for Libraries Press.

Larkin, Lesley. 2015. "Close Reading 'You:' Ralph Ellison." In *Race and the Literary Encounter: Black Literature from James Weldon Johnson to Percival Everett*, 92–123. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Lee, Julia Sun-Joo. 2006. "Knucklebones and Knocking-Bones: The Accidental Trickster in Ellison's 'Invisible Man.'" *African American Review* 40 (3):461–73.

Lott, Eric. 1993. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Moretti, Franco. 2000. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso.

Murray, Albert. 1990. *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy*. New York (NY): Da Capo Press.

Nadel, Alan. 1991. *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

O'Meally, Robert (ed.). 1988. *New Essays on Invisible Man*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ostendorf, Berndt. 1988. "Ralph Waldo Ellison: Anthropology, Modernism, and Jazz." In *New Essays on Ellison's Invisible Man*, edited by Robert O'Meally, 95-122. Cambridge University Press.

Persson, Torleif. 2020. "Ralph Ellison's Contemporaneity." *Novel* 53 (1):16–36.

Peterson, Dale E. 1993. "Response and Call: The African American Dialogue with Bakhtin and What It Signifies." *American Literature* 65 (4):761–75.

Pilgrim, David. "The Coon Caricature." Ferris State University. Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, 2000. <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/coon/> Web. 24 Nov. 2021.

Porter, Horace A. 2001. *Jazz Country Ralph Ellison in America*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Reilly, John M. 1970. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Hoboken (NJ): Prentice-Hall.

Schaub, Thomas H. 1991. *American Fiction in the Cold War*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Scott, Daryl Michael. 1997. *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Shinn, Christopher A. 2002. "Masquerade, Magic, and Carnival in Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man.'" *African American Review* 36 (2):243–61.

Smith, Valerie. 2004. "The Meaning of Narration in Invisible Man." *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*, edited by John F. Callahan, 189–220. New York: Oxford University Press.

Spaulding, A. Timothy. 2004. "Embracing Chaos in Narrative Form: The Bebop Aesthetic and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man." *Callaloo* 27 (2):481–501.

Stepto, Robert B. 1987. "Literacy and Hibernation: Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man." In *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, edited by Kiberly W. Benston, 360–85. Washington DC: Howard University Press.

The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century. The New Territory. University Press of Mississippi. Accessed April 12, 2021.

Watts, Jerry Gafio. 1994. *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Wilcox, Johnnie. 2007. "Black Power: Minstrelsy and Electricity in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man." *Callaloo* 30 (4):987–1009.

Wright, John S. 2005. "Ellison's Experimental Attitude and the Technologies of Illumination." In *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, edited by Ross Posnock, 157–71. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2006. *Shadowing Ralph Ellison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Young, Robert. 1985. "Back to Bakhtin." *Cultural Critique* 2:71–92.

Zebulah Baldwin is a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City. His research interests include American Studies, African American literature, Computational Literary Analysis, and Critical Theory. His dissertation project uses close and "distant" reading strategies to re-conceptualize the rhetorical shape of the novels of

the New Negro or "Harlem" Renaissance through analysis of their structures of mediations, their system of genres, and their symbolic geographies. Email address: zebulah.baldwin@gmail.com

PIECING TOGETHER AFRICAN AMERICANS' FUTURE: THE SUBVERSIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDREN AND DEATH AS A SPACE OF CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL REAPPROPRIATION IN JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING*

Elisa Pesce
University of Glasgow

ABSTRACT

This paper explores literary representations of the direct and indirect consequences of the US state of policing on twenty-first-century African American children. Ever since Achille Mbembe's first conceptualization of necropolitics as an ultimate expression of sovereignty in late-modern colonial contexts, the incessant development in the US of increasingly subtle ways to enforce necro citizenship on specific demographic groups have prompted scholars to further reflect on attitudes toward death in contemporary Western societies. In particular, the necessity emerged to restore necropolitics' role as a universal process underlying the establishment of communities' cultural and historical awareness through the practice of collective mourning. By analyzing children characters in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I argue that if, on the one hand, children's inherent ability to represent the future is marred among African Americans by ongoing racial discrimination and injustice, on the other hand, it can also become a powerful means to overturn oppressive necropolitical discourses and practices. While engaging in a long tradition of protest literature and its use of African spirituality to create literary sites of resistance for Black Americans, Ward's novel intersects Sharon P. Holland's theory about the liberating, political power of creative writing on several levels: the most interesting and subversive is Kayla's character. The three-year-old toddler does not only embody the past and present history of African Americans, from the experience of the Middle Passage to a condition of forced silence; more significantly, she challenges received assumptions about childhood and the marginal(ized) position of her people in US society by engaging with death and the dead, thus offering a redemptive and liberating perspective from which to conceive and (re)build African Americans' future.
Keywords: Jesmyn Ward; African American protest literature; Necropolitics; Americans and death; Child characters.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores literary representations of the direct and indirect consequences of the state of policing in the twenty-first-century US by focusing on children characters in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. To begin with, I will present the theoretical framework that informed my reflections on death, race, and childhood in the novel. After that, I will analyze the role young Jojo and Kayla play in the narrative by concentrating especially on the three-year-old girl. I argue that, in addition to challenging received assumptions about childhood and the marginal(ized) position of

African Americans in US society, Kayla also overturns dominant necropolitical discourses and practices, by subversively harnessing the complex interplay between death and the racialized subject. In so doing, she offers a new redemptive and liberating perspective on her community's past, while restoring African Americans' hopes for posterity.

In western cultures, children represent the future. They are their parents' legacy, not only at an individual and family level, but also as citizens of nations for which they represent the most natural and powerful way to safeguard and transmit specific cultural and historical values. Because of their inherent innocence and fragility, they must therefore be protected from all forms of physical and mental harm, so that they can grow up into healthy, successful adults.[1] This also implies shielding them from those aspects of human life which are considered either too complex for them to understand, or too painful to cope with—first and foremost, death. In the US, a nation as historically marked by racial divisions as by a troublesome, disenchanted relationship with death,[2] the safeguarding of human life holds true only for the dominant, white majority, whereas other ethnic groups—especially African Americans—are still disproportionately exposed to death in their everyday lives compared to the average citizen of a modern, wealthy country. One of the reasons lying behind such an

---

[1] In The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century, Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) offers a thought-provoking approach to the conceptualization of childhood in western cultures, which I here partly summarize. (a) The all-Westerner conceptualization of children as future produces delusional visions ("the child as the emblem of parents' (impossible) continuity") and reproductive expectations instrumental to the political exploitation of the "image of the child" as a means to regulate social life, as demonstrated also by the rhetoric that "[p]olitics is only done now in the name of, and for the sake of, 'our children's future'" (13). (b) Since the child is defined in retrospect as "the specter of who we were when there was nothing yet behind us," adults feel compelled to safeguard its innocence, but only insofar as it originates from the feature of weakness signaling the child's compliance to western normative standards. Consequently, the right to protection—and to have a childhood—is a privilege of the white, middle-class child (30-31), which poses questions about the inclusion of other children (primarily of color) in discourses about the future. (c) Stockton urges to replace the idea of vertical, limited growth conveyed by the phrase "growing up" with the lateral extensions and connections allowed by "growing sideways," which suggest alternative forms of relation between children and adults (22).

[2] In 1918, Max Weber described postwar existence as a "disenchanted" world, in which "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather . . . one can in principle, master all things by calculation" and perceive death as "a meaningless occurrence" (2005, 139-40). Similarly, paraphrasing Jean Baudrillard, Raymond L. M. Lee (2002) explains that "in modernity there is a complete break with people who are dead" and that it is "this lack of ritual continuity . . . that characterize death in modernity as disenchanted" (100).

imbalance is the intricate web of policing measures through which the US state and federal governments have been exercising control since the nation's foundation.

The US state of policing has historically exploited "violence against black children as a means of establishing and maintaining white supremacy . . . [and of] suppressing their present and future attainment of citizenship rights" (Webster 2020). For example, the presence of police officers in public schools is often the cause of physical violence against Black students, rather than a source of protection. In addition, inequality in disciplinary policies and "zero-tolerance" for school rules infractions contribute to the early criminalization of young African Americans through the so-called "school-to-prison pipeline" (American Civil Liberties Union 2021). As argued by Hajela and Whitehurst, "[r]esearch shows Black children are often viewed as being older than they are, and are more likely to be seen as threatening or dangerous. . . . [P]olice [treat] them in ways they wouldn't dream of treating white children" (2021). This includes an unwarranted use of force by law enforcement, adult treatment in court trials, and a six times higher chance to die from police gunfire than white children. Finally, several forms of discrimination continue to limit Black students' access to education, where the achievement gap with white students shows no signs of abating,[3] children with disabilities often receive services for emotional disturbances—thus encouraging social stigma—and Black teachers are still largely outnumbered by white colleagues (National School Boards Association 2020).

Set in Bois Sauvage, a fictional version of DeLisle, Mississippi, Jesmyn Ward's novels consistently deal with the multiple challenges that young African Americans have to face in their daily lives, especially in the rural South. *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008) follows twins Joshua and Christophe in their struggle to get a job after graduation, with Christophe turning to drug dealing for lack of a better option. *Salvage the Bones* (2011) tells the story of a pregnant teenager, Esch, and her family as they

---

[3] According to the National School Boards Association website (2020), in 2018, the dropout rate for Black students was 4.2% higher than that for white students, while the number of Black 18- to 24-year-olds who were neither enrolled in school nor working was 14% higher than that of white people in the same age group.

prepare for Hurricane Katrina, denouncing the way thousands of people were completely forgotten by institutions in the midst of this tragic event. But it is in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) that Ward provides her most accurate account of how African Americans' future is put into question by racial discrimination and state-sanctioned violence: its youngest protagonists, Jojo and Kayla, have to cope with absent and addict parents, police abuse, and several encounters with death. At the same time, however, the novel manages to restore hope, by transforming death itself into a means for cultural and historical reappropriation.

NO COUNTRY FOR DEATH

Over the last century, modern, technological societies have in many respects learned to tame death, so that most people living in western countries can be said to enjoy a relatively long part of their lives without having to deal with its most direct and disturbing aspects, particularly during their childhood. This implies, among other things, that in highly developed industrialized nations, the death of a child is not just experienced as an extremely traumatic event for parents, who expect their progeny to naturally outlive them.[4] Rather, it has also come to stand as an unfathomable mark of failure for governments, as they largely measure the level of prosperity enjoyed by their constituencies through indicators such as extremely low child mortality rates, widespread and long-term access to education, and the quality of family policies. Consequently, the importance of and concern for children's health and wellbeing have

---

[4] Russell Banks's *The Sweet Hereafter* provides a telling reflection on the collective, traumatic experience represented by the death of a child in contemporary societies: "People who have lost their children . . . twist themselves into all kinds of weird shapes in order to deny what happened. Not just because of the pain of losing a person they have loved . . . but because what has happened is so wickedly unnatural, so profoundly against the natural order of things, that we cannot accept it. It's almost beyond belief or comprehension that the children should die before the adults. It flies in the face of biology, it contradicts history, it denies cause and effect, it violates basic physics, even. It's the final contrary. A town that loses its children loses its meaning" (1991, 78).

increasingly become the object of state politics, which in turn have shaped the role as well as the cultural significance of childhood in contemporary developed countries.[5]

Against such premises, the US represents an exception, as is often the case. As British Jamaican writer Zadie Smith pointed out in a recent essay, in the twentieth century the US developed a reputation as a nation forgotten by death, the most successful example of the West's effort to prolong life through scientific, technological, and medical progress.[6] What Americans are missing, however, is not "dead people . . . casualties [or] victims," but rather "the concept of death itself, death absolute. The kind of death that comes to us all, irrespective of position." One reason for this is that finitude represents the very antithesis of the American dream, in every possible aspect of individual and social life. Moreover, Americans have "rarely been philosophically inclined to consider existence as a whole, preferring to attack death as a series of discrete problems" which inevitably "[involve] some culpability on the part of the dead" (2020, 12). Such culpability rests on the same racist dynamics that regulate most aspects of American society, as is fittingly confirmed, to the purpose of this paper, by the fact that, since the turn of the twenty-first century, the US exceptional estrangement from death has been accompanied by another equally exceptional trend—although in the negative sense of the term—in their national maternal and infant death rates: a 2018 study found that "American kids are 70 percent more likely to die before adulthood than kids in other rich countries" (Kliff 2018). Likewise, maternal mortality increased "nearly 27 percent from 2000 to 2014," a trend recorded in the US alone among all other wealthy nations. Driving this singular crisis are the high(er) mortality rates recorded among African American women, which research studies account for as a result of the

---

[5] Despite Anglo-American cultures' attempts to conceive of the child as a "carefully controlled embodiment of noncomplication (increasingly protected from labor, sex, and painful understanding), the child has gotten thick with complication. Even as idea [which also made it] stranger, more fundamentally foreign, to adults" (Stockton 2009, 5).
[6] For a chronological and more comprehensive account of the particular relationship between Americans and death, see Charles O. Jackson, "American Attitudes to Death," which traces the shift from the domestication and sentimentalization of death in the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century period to the progressive withdrawal of the living from all things related to death which culminated in post-WWII "fun-morality" (1977, 309).

cumulative effects of racism, rather than of biological/genetic differences (Novoa and Taylor 2018).

Among the few scholars who engaged the role of death and its interconnections with race and racism in the formation of the American identity, Sharon P. Holland highlights the necessity to further explore the "space of death" – both social and literal – in the US imaginary, as to discover who inhabits it and why we strive to keep those subjects there (2000, 4). The scholar's contentions are twofold. First, she argues that, following emancipation, the condition of the enslaved did not disappear, but rather was transferred to the space of imagination, where it became "fodder for both romantic fictions and horrific realities" (14-15). Second, in agreement with Patterson's theory of social death, she affirms that enslaved Africans were subjected to a double process of genealogical isolation: on the one hand, they were denied any kind of relationship to their living blood relatives through the legal status of chattel; on the other hand, the diaspora deprived them of any means of transforming their past into legacy by implementing the social heritage of their ancestors into their lives (13). As a result, today, African Americans still find themselves in a state of social isolation that makes them closer to the dead than historians and critics have so far articulated (15), since both groups are relegated to the same imaginary space of the invisible.

Significantly, Holland explains that Black people's invisibility also serves the purpose of "divest[ing] death of any power by submerging it in anonymity," so that it is not fearful anymore for the non-racially marked subject (2000, 38). This aspect of the interrelation between race and death builds on Russ Castronovo's conceptualization of necro citizenship, a form of "social death" which emerged in the nineteenth century as an "erotically charged state of eternal freedom" associated with US citizenship and through which white Americans were somehow dispensed from participating in the political life of the nation. This process of abstraction/disembodiment, however, required other hyperembodied identities against which to define the legitimate American citizen. According to Castronovo, African American men, who experienced social death in its ultimate expression under slavery as well as in the form of isolation after emancipation, served the purpose of providing expendable bodies to passively

support the socio-economic system on which the American ideal of democratic freedom relied (Shockley 2002, 683-84). This helps understand Holland's statement about the need for Black death to be invisible: "[w]e have nothing to fear from anonymity. If we cannot recall a face that looks like our own, then we cannot fear our own death in quite the same way. . . . The death of black subjects or the invisibility of blackness . . . [therefore] ward[s] off a nation's collective dread of the inevitable" (38). In a country of disembodied citizens, this implies that the embodied other is also the one who inevitably can—or should—die first.

A government's "power and . . . capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" has been described by Mbembe and Meintjes as necropolitics, a form of biopower in which "[t]o exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (2003, 11-12). First deployed in late-modern colonial contexts to enforce sovereignty on indigenous populations, over time such policing measures have evolved and ranged from the actual control over biological existence to social death to the exclusion of certain groups from opportunity. Race and racism have been used throughout to create and support fictionalized notions of enmity that helped regulate the distribution of death, and guarantee the survival of state power (16-17). However, in postcolonial societies, where their interpretation "inevitably becomes politicized, as the question of legitimacy, lineage, inheritance, and thus of *power* over the present [and, I would add, the future] comes to the fore" (Ruin 2019, 96; emphasis in the original), necropolitics took on further, special significance. The complexity of the social, political, and cultural dynamics which regulate life and death in such contexts—of which the US represent the most singular instance—have recently urged scholars to rethink necropolitics in relation to the historical, so as to restore their importance as part of the universal process through which cultural and historical awareness is achieved within a community by means of all those practices aimed at creating a sense of identity and belonging by taking care of the dead.

Whereas this perspective casts a more positive light on necropolitical phenomena, it also underlines the fact that sovereignty can be and has historically been enforced not only on the living, but also, and especially, on the dead. The ability to

control the dead, in fact, is of crucial importance to anyone in a position of power, since it allows them to select the voices which partake in a nation's foundational narrative.[7] From this perspective, necropolitics can be seen as the result of a long evolution in the way of understanding and harnessing the relationship between the living and the dead, one in which repression can be directed toward increasingly well-defined groups which the dominant society wishes to reduce to an invisible other. One of the ways in which literature can exercise its power to denounce and redress the omission, manipulation, and appropriation of mainstream historical records is by challenging literary canons' effort "to master borders (both perceived and unperceived), to discipline people whose imaginations consistently resist and/or subvert attempts to establish recognizable hegemony" (Holland 1994, 334). Such borders include that which separates the living from the dead, which creative writers manage to circumvent by "bringing the subject of death and our national imaginings to the forefront" (Holland 2000, 40).

Jesmyn Ward's National Book Award winner *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a wonderful instance of fictional narrative where the dead play an active and emancipating part in their descendants' lives. While engaging in a long tradition of protest literature[8] which uses African spirituality to create literary sites of resistance for Black Americans (Mellis 2019, 2), Ward's third novel deploys the liberating, political power of creative writing on several levels, the most interesting and subversive of which can be found in Kayla's character. In particular, the three-year-old offers a fascinating opportunity to further stretch Holland's argumentation about the dead and African Americans' sharing of the same imaginary space both as a prerequisite for and as a result of the nation's state of policing. To include children in discourses about death is not only useful for understanding the ways in which race and necropolitics are used to prevent second-

---

[7] "Should [the silenced dead] rise and speak for themselves, the state would lose all right to their borrowed and/or stolen language," thus compromising the very existence of the nation (Holland 2000, 28).

[8] By "protest literature," Mellis refers to the "long and storied tradition of African-American authors [who use] their work to protest oppression in America," including authors—such as Ward and Colson Whitehead—who "invok[e] African-based spiritual traditions variously: as a literary trope, a tie to originary African identity, and . . . as a means of empowerment for characters to control or punish, or as protection from and resistance to a racially oppressive society" (2019, 2).

class citizens from even imagining a (better) future; it also allows to cast new light on the cultural and political role of literature in resisting and overturning those same oppressing strategies.

REDEEMING DEATH: A LOOPHOLE OF RETREAT

One of the analogies underpinning the use of fiction as a means for reclamation and empowerment is that between human bodies and bodies of literature, in other words between body and text. As the target of persistent policing strategies through which the US have historically defined and imposed conditions of economic and social oppression, the Black body constitutes a "walking text, a fleshy reminder of the paradoxical nature of an American citizenry built around the ideology of difference" (Henderson 2002, 3). For this same reason, following the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans have increasingly been portraying their bodies in a way that allows them to "'speak' into existence their own humanity but to do so in a way that resists racist or sexist paradigms of subjugated embodiment" (Henderson 2002, 3). In her introduction to *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*, Carol E. Henderson significantly describes American society as

> in a constant state of *re*writing the cultural significance of the African American individual through the use of his or her body. Much of the methodological figurings of the systems of oppression consistently silence the voice of the subjugated using the body as their vehicle. . . . African American culture, when taken as a whole, confronts this silencing by creating moments of resistance or "loopholes of retreat" that not only speak to the resilience of African American people but also allow for the *re*conceptualization of literal and figurative bodies within certain delimiting social structures. It is the gap between the literal and the figurative that allows for the possibility of speaking a counterdiscourse of the black body. (2002, 6; emphasis in the original)

Kayla's role in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is to create such a "loophole," where the evident fragility of her body and her limited speech are compensated by the ability to communicate with and raise the voices of the dead. Extremely rich in references to the body—both human and non-human—and to the difficulty for African Americans to

speak up, Ward's novel offers a vivid and touching display of the consequences of growing up in a Black family in one of the poorest rural areas of the US South, which Jojo and Kayla manage to cope with precisely by embracing and repurposing the inevitability of death.

The novel begins with thirteen-year-old Jojo mentally preparing himself to help Pop, his grandfather, to slaughter a goat for his birthday meal. From the very first lines, the boy shows his premature awareness of death, by stating "I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight" (Ward 2017, 6). This is due to a toxic notion of hyper-masculinity (often transmuted to bestiality) which has long been enforced on African American men by white society, resulting in "black males [living or dead] remain[ing] spectral as their frustrated black bodies are endlessly rejected and disembodied" (Choi 2018, 434). Such spectrality is further enhanced by the all-too-frequent physical absence of men in African American families, due to premature death or various forms of racial discrimination which make them the primary victims of mass incarceration. In Ward's novel, if Jojo's future seems forever doomed by the pervasive and almost ubiquitous presence of Parchman State Penitentiary in his family history, the boy is also offered an alternative model of masculinity by her grandmother Philomène. Mam shows him the importance of mourning as a form of healing and creates "a diachronic space of remembrance as opposed to the annihilating space of Parchman. Her oceanic space breaks out the vicious cycle of the black experience and invites the unburied and the living to the space of black collectivity. . . . [The] distorted understanding of manliness [represented by Parchman] is replaced with therapeutic encounter with death" (446).

While I agree with Choi's statement above, it seems to me that what actually saves Jojo from an assumed destiny of invisibility and annihilation is the encounter not—or at least not only—with death at large, but rather with its consequences: the dead, their ghosts, and their untold or forgotten stories. This becomes more evident by focusing on Kayla, the ultimate repository of both her family's and her community's history of trauma. In fact, despite Jojo being the character around which the novel is constructed (Biedenharn 2017), I argue that the boy is not enough for Ward's message

to become universal: it is Kayla who performs the song mentioned in the title, which eventually appeases the spirits of the unburied "generations of black Southerners undone by racism and history, lynched, raped, enslaved, shot, and imprisoned" (Quin 2017). The most vulnerable of the novel's protagonists by virtue of her young age, Kayla is also the one who most effectively challenges and resists the multiple systems of control enforced on her community, as shown by her crucial contribution to her family's literal and spiritual survival in several points of the narrative.[9] Nevertheless, the reader has to rely on Jojo and Leonie in order to learn about her: while she is constantly quoted, described, paraphrased, and interpreted by her brother and mother, Kayla has no narrating voice of her own, both because she is clearly too young to be up to the task[10] and, I believe, because she embodies the condition of Americans of African descent as a whole. A careful look at the physical and mental description of her character is, therefore, fundamental to understand the most profound meaning of Ward's story.

The cumulative effect of Kayla's national and family (hi)story of racism and poverty are almost inscribed on her minute body.[11] Whereas Jojo received some attention from his mother as a child, Kayla never knew Leonie "when there was more good than bad" (Ward 2017, 10). Despite her grandparents' best efforts to provide for her and make up for her uncaring parents, she is described as "a short three-year-old, so

---

[9] In addition to providing Jojo with a crucial source of emotional comfort whenever Pop is not around, Kayla is also the only family member who occasionally manages to stir Leonie's faint sense of responsibility and desire to reinstate a healthy relationship with her children. When the whole family is threatened by a police officer on their way back from Parchman, Kayla both actively tries to physically protect Jojo and provides a way out of that dreadful situation. Also, she is the first to detect Richie's presence in Mam's bedroom, thus allowing Leonie to intervene, and the one who eventually manages to deliver her family from the boy's haunting influence.

[10] In this respect, Ward distances herself from her major literary source of inspiration: whereas in *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner entrusts his story to seven different narrators, including young, cryptic Vardaman, Ward allows only the three characters who are more connected with one another by the family's history of trauma to speak in first person: Richie, whose death marked the origin of River's sense of guilt and impotence; Leonie, whose instability is the direct product of the traumatic heritage engendered by both Richie's and Given's death; and Jojo, who has to contend with all this. Moreover, Ward's characters talk as they would do in real life. Their grammar is not corrected to proper English, nor is the language of children stylistically revised to convey a more mature, and therefore inconsistent, level of introspection.

[11] It is important to remember that class and specific, local socio-economic conditions play an equally important role in the novel, alongside race. Despite being white, Jojo and Kayla's father falls victim to the same dynamics which systematically destroy African American individuals and families. Similarly, the aggressive child whom the party encounters on their way to All's is further proof that in Mississippi drug addiction and poverty issues seriously affect white families, too.

when she curls into [Jojo], her feet don't even hang over [his] lap." Her stride is unsteady and when she is not toddling around, she inevitably asks Jojo to scoop her up and cuddle her. Since birth, she has learned to depend primarily on her brother for love and support: "she got so used to me coming in the middle of the night with her bottle. So I sleep on the floor next to Leonie's bed, and most nights Kayla ends up on my pallet with me, since Leonie's mostly gone," says Jojo (20). Moreover, Leonie never breast-fed Kayla, which led the girl to take up compensating habits to comfort herself, such as reaching out for one of her brother's ear lobes to knead it (25). Less unusual for her age, but certainly contributing to the sense of disarming cuteness and vulnerability conveyed by her character, is Kayla's smell which, for better or for worse, unequivocally evokes the earliest stages of childhood: "warm milk, . . . baby powder" (20), and coconut hair lotion are replaced by the harsh stench of sweat and throw-up (89) during her car trip to Parchman, when the two siblings have to fend for themselves in a long series of dire situations. Siblings' mutual support is an essential element of resilience for African American youth (Keeble 2020, 46) and one of the reasons why Leonie is so jealous of her children: she is aware of her poor parenting skills, but what really angers and hurts her about the way Jojo and Kayla "turn to each other like plants following the sun across the sky" is the thought that she was deprived of the same kind of affection when her brother Given was murdered. While she watches her children sleep, she confesses to herself: "I think Given must have held me like that once, that once we breathed mouth to mouth and inhaled the same air" (Ward 2017, 120).

Ward's characters as a whole assume quite a mythical status with reference to contemporary African Americans, in that they have all survived a number of traumatic events that forever affected their ability to create sound emotional bonds. On the extremely poor Mississippi Gulf Coast, the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow built up over the centuries and is now taking its toll on Leonie and Michael. A multiethnic couple,[12]

---

[12] The term multiethnic is here preferred to multiracial, in order to highlight the controversial nature of the concept of race itself and its connection to social constructs and ideologies which serve oppressive and discriminatory purposes.

one "the color of unmilked coffee" (Ward 2017, 47), the other so ghostly white that his skin "eats up the light from the growing day" (121), they are both equally crushed by the weight of their family histories and seek refuge in drugs as well as in the intoxicating love that they have for each other. Their inability to cope with pain and loss has obvious repercussions on their two children and is rooted in the social background and living conditions of many multiethnic and Black families. Leonie's brother, Given, was shot by Michael's cousin for winning a hunting game when he was just a senior. Protected by the color of his skin, the killer got away with it by declaring that it was an accident. Nevertheless, when Leonie and Michael started dating and soon had their first child, the uncomfortable truth about Given's tragic death didn't unite the two families in common grief. Instead, it separated them even further, leaving Leonie, Michael, and their children in a sort of interracial limbo.

When read together, these events help infer the reasons underlying the young couple's poor parenting abilities. As a teenager, Leonie found herself alone to cope with her parents' grief. Unable to partake in their mourning, she developed a sort of inferiority complex toward both her late brother and her mother, which resulted in the conviction of being an unwanted, surviving child, incapable of fulfilling her parents' expectations.[13] Feeling lost and alone, only her consuming love for Michael (all the more precious because reciprocated in a racist society) could relieve her pain and sense of guilt. On the other side of the color line, Michael was an outcast, too, a teenager struggling to deal with the implications of loving a person that his father still called and considered a "nigger" (Ward 2017, 47). He used to work on an oil rig, but was dismissed following a serious environmental accident in which several of his colleagues died. The shock and remorse caused by this event combined with his inability to find another job in one of the poorest regions of the US. The couple, then, moved back in with Leonie's parents and Michael sought refuge from his trauma in methamphetamines. Sentenced

---

[13] This is most evident from Leonie's recollection of the moment when she discussed her first pregnancy with her mother: Mam, transfigured into the Medusa by a flash of lightning, appeared to her as the image of perfection, thus forcing Leonie to accept maternity against her own will (Ward 2017, 125-26)

to three years of imprisonment for drug dealing, he went through the same painful experience of incarceration as his father-in-law. River, in fact, had been a convict at Parchman State Penitentiary at the age of fifteen and has been haunted ever since by the memory of Richie, the youngest of his prison mates, whom he mercifully killed.

While obviously affecting Jojo as well, Leonie and Michael's troublesome story, both as individuals and as a multiethnic couple, took its most dramatic turn around the time of Kayla's birth, thus compromising her life since the very beginning. Besides her physical growth, her speech abilities, too, are underdeveloped for a three-year-old. However, if in the average white American family this would alert parents and prompt them to consult a speech therapist, the circumstances in which Kayla lives betray, on the one hand, the frequency of such developmental issues and, on the other hand, the existence of far worse scenarios among African Americans than the one painted by Ward. Furthermore, I believe that silencing Kayla is one of the key strategies through which the writer appointed her as the major representative of her demographic group at large in the novel, as clearly shown by her relationship with the dead.

SOMETHING "ALL HER. KAYLA."

Kayla's character allows Ward to tackle necropolitical issues around voice, language, and silencing from the most powerful and effective perspective of all: that of a toddler, who overturns every possible expectation connected to her age by actively engaging with the dead in order to claim back her (community's) right to have a future. In fact, being partly African American, Kayla is not entitled to any kind of childhood-related form of protection in US society and is as invisible as any colored adult. From the liminal space that she shares with the dead, she is nevertheless able to exercise a subversive force against two major socio-cultural constructs. On the one hand, she exposes "the problem of the child as a general idea" described by Stockton: "The child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fancy, making us wonder: Given that we cannot know the contours of children, who they are to themselves, should we stop talking of children altogether?" (2009, 5). To see the child as a ghostly, romantic idea adds yet another feature to those

of race and gender which, according to white socio-cultural standards, mark Kayla as dead, that is, as intrinsically invisible.

On the other hand, though, as a non-verbal character, Kayla both instantiates and overturns the silencing practices historically enforced on African Americans. As highlighted by Chevalier, Black deaths are "visually communicated, not spoken" (2020, 229) by the multitude of ghosts perched on the trees at the end of Ward's novel. This prominence of image over words further stresses the role of silencing in racial oppression and highlights the failure of language to fully and effectively rehabilitate the voice and the legacy of the dead. Similarly, to finally know his own story is not enough for Richie to cross over: "I thought once I knew, I could. Cross the waters. Be home. Maybe there, I could . . . become something else. Maybe I could. Become. The song," he explains to Jojo (Ward 2017, 223). But the song for the dead, the one which eventually restores memory and peace among the spirits of unmourned African Americans, doesn't sound like regular language; rather, it is "a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing that [even Jojo] can understand. Only the melody, which is low but as loud as the swish and sway of the trees, that cuts their whispering but twines with it at the same time" (226). Silenced, like her people, by the racialized history and politics of the South, only Kayla knows how to (re)create the conditions for listening to the voices of her ancestors, and evoke the universal melody which resonates in all living beings, past and present, human and non-human, thus reinstating the possibility of proper mourning and narrative memory among African Americans.[14]

---

[14] Chevalier stresses the importance of mourning as a means to guarantee a safe transition of the spirit to the other world and into another form – a story, a voice, a song. This becomes evident in "Richie's failure to cross over [which] is attenuated to the violence of his death at River's hands. The failure to transition is the silence attenuated to his death, specifically in the lack of grieving, or mourning. . . . Richie *is not grieved.*" Apart from creating ghosts, "[t]he lack of grieving black, violent death . . . 'traumatizes the survivors into silence'" (2020, 228; emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, Ward compensates for all this violence by making Richie one of the story's narrators: as highlighted by Khedhir (2020), by allowing him "to tell first-hand stories about the past, Ward gives voice to the voiceless and the oppressed and endows him with the agency to re-create the past, shifting the focus from traumatic memory to narrative memory" (2020, 20). Khedhir's narrative memory builds upon Brogan's concept of "Cultural Haunting," according to which "ghosts are used in American literature of different ethnic backgrounds as a memory tool to show how the past interacts with the present . . . to restore lost cultural identities, to re-create an ethnic identity by recalling a collective history, and to disrupt historical chronology by introducing a meta-narrative and inserting fragmented or absent discourse" (18).

However, Ward's message can be further extended. Even after Kayla performs the song, the ghosts don't fly away. Their storytelling is urgently needed to help the living overcome the collective trauma caused by slavery and oppression, similarly to Pop once he eventually manages to tell the end of Richie's story to Jojo. But the dead cannot leave this world, because as invisible and threatening as they may be, they are an indispensable part of it. In the song, they find their liminal, yet peaceful and empowering home: the "historical, social, and ontological dimension that humans share with 'those *having been*'" that Ruin, quoting Heidegger, calls "being with the dead" (2019, 5; emphasis in the original), and that Chevalier describes as "the multiplicity of this world" (229). Kayla's interaction with the dead in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is neither a mere literary trope nor a way to suggest an originary African identity as an alternative to a hyphenated American one. Its function is political and aimed at resistance and emancipation. It highlights the importance of a form of spirituality in which both the living and the dead participate as a key tool for ethnic minority groups to cope with, resist, and fight back the oppressive racial and class ideologies that govern US society.[15] By restoring a positive, active role of death in African American lives, necropolitical discourses pivoting around their invisibility are overturned and new hopes emerge for the preservation of the individual and collective identities that lay the basis for cultural and historical awareness. According to Marco Petrelli, to conjure a protected site of collective healing allows for "what Judith Butler defines as a 'successful' mourning [to take place, a process which] contemplates not only the pain of losing, but also how loss brings about recognition on a cultural and social level" (2020, 286).

To resume my analysis of Kayla, silence is not the only feature through which the toddler embodies the past and present condition of her people in Ward's narrative. As highlighted by Choi, throughout the novel, African Americans' resistance to

---

[15] Petrelli remarks that African American literary ghosts are fundamental "catalysts, conjuring that crossroad upon which the relationship between subject, place, and history is negotiated through narrative." This type of narration which "proceeds from an experience of place rooted in spiritualism" (2020, 279) also resonates with Chevalier's and Khedhir's argumentations above about the role of mourning and narrative memory in the creation of literary sites of resistance.

"psychologically digest" their collective history of trauma is demonstrated by the frequent episodes of vomiting (2018, 433-34). The most specific metaphor created by Ward in this sense is Kayla's carsickness on her way to Parchman: a metaphor for slavery, the state penitentiary is a sort of netherworld which haunts each and every member of Pop's family. Accordingly, Kayla's discomfort throughout the car trip to collect Michael comes to evoke the seasickness of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage (442), reinforcing the girl's symbolic role in the narrative. The correlation between vomiting and the necessity for African Americans to fight back is even more evident from an episode that literally takes place on the road, which Nicole Dib describes as one of the historically "contested space[s] where black bodies are policed" (2020, 135). On their way home, the group is pulled over by a patrol officer, who promptly reacts to the information that they are returning from Parchman by handcuffing Leonie, Michael, and finally Jojo. Seized by fear, the boy tries to reach his pocket for his grandfather's gris-gris bag, his only source of protection, but the police officer doesn't hesitate to put a gun to his head. The moments that follow are dominated by a tense feeling of imminent death, made all the more dreadful by Leonie's words, underlining the innocence and fragility of her son's body:

> It's easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer. It's easy to look at him, his weedy height, the thick spread of his belly, and think he's grown. But he's just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain't nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. I should scream, but I can't. . . . I blink and I see the bullet cleaving the soft butter of him. (Ward 2017, 130)

Of all the people involved, the only one who reacts is Kayla, who kicks off the officer, wrestles to escape Misty's (Leonie's white friend) grip, and bravely struggles to protect her brother. Jojo narrates: "Kayla moves so fast, small and fierce, to jump on my back. I should soothe Kayla, should tell her to run back to Misty, to get down and let me go, but I can't speak. . . . *What if he shoot her?* I think. *What if he shoot both of us*?" Distracted just for one second by Richie's ghost—almost a looming reminder of what could happen when an African American driver is stopped by the police—the boy "can't

help but return to this: Kayla's brown arms and that gun, black as rot, as pregnant with dread" (Ward 2017, 135; emphasis in the original). Eventually, the episode ends with Kayla throwing up on the officer's uniform, apparently at the suggestion of her uncle Given's ghost.

The atemporality engendered by the presence of ghosts in African American literature inevitably raises questions about the future of Black and Brown people in the US, and acquires a specific significance in Ward's novel, whose central characters—one ghost included—are children. In a society where not even extremely young people can escape the consequences of racism and the state of policing which relegates non-white Americans to the marginal space of the dead, what are the chances that racial injustice will eventually disappear? Once again, Ward conveys her thoughts through Kayla. Whereas Jojo took more after Pop, Kayla is a perfect mix of inherited traits, each evoking one of her family members: "Her eyes Michael's, her nose Leonie's, the set of her shoulders Pop's, and the way she looks upward, like she is measuring the tree, all Mam. But something about the way she stands, the way she takes all the pieces of everybody and holds them together, is all her. Kayla" (Ward 2017, 225). It is precisely this ability to summarize and embody her family's past while, at the same time, adding a new, powerful element to it that allows Kayla to reclaim her ability as a child to represent the future despite the color of her skin.

CONCLUSION

When Richie attempts on Mam's life hoping that he will finally be able to move on, Leonie explicitly shares her concern about what tomorrow will bring to her and her daughter: Kayla feels the presence of the boy's ghost and runs to the door of her grandmother's bedroom to try to open it. Her words—"He want Mam!"—alarm Leonie, who suddenly realizes that her daughter, too, could have supernatural gifts. At the simple thought of what this might imply, fear seizes her, "spilling through my chest, scalding-hot grits. I wonder at my short, round toddler with her toes grazing the door, *at the future and what it will demand of me. Of her*" (209; emphasis mine). But her fear is due to the awareness that she is the one who is "not prepared to see" (209) what is

happening in Mam's room—nor is she prepared to face the future in a broader sense. However, Leonie needs not to worry, because despite being a baby, Kayla is fully aware of her ability to hear the voices of any living and dead being around her, as well as to see and communicate with spirits. Her "golden, clinging toddler, the tilt of her head and those clear eyes direct and merciless as an adult's" (Ward 2017, 163), is not in the least scared by it[16]—or by any demonstration of racism, such as the abusive behavior of the police, or the prejudices of her paternal grandparents.

What makes her special is the fact that her fearless attitude in the face of death and the supernatural is neither the result of a sort of training in using her gifts (which her extremely young age totally precludes), nor of any critical ability which might be acquired over time through lived experience or standard education. The ease and self-assurance with which she deals with Richie's ghost and the other spirits that she meets in the wood at the end of the novel are and can only be the product of what Holland describes as a full and unreserved embrace of one's own "crossblood identity:" contrary to "mixed blood African-American[s] . . . who have the *knowledge* of some European and/or Native ancestry," Kayla "*identify[s]* as such, [which allows her] to consistently cross the borders of ideological containment" (1994, 335; emphasis in the original)— including the one which separates the living from the dead. From this perspective, Kayla finds an antecedent in decolonial literature in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.[17] Oscar's niece, the newborn Isis, is the only one who may live to see the centuries-long *fuku* curse which afflicts her family (and symbolically the entire Dominican American community) run its course and lose its force. Yet, in order to

---

[16] Jojo comments when he realizes that Kayla can read thoughts, too: "I look back at Kayla and she has her two middle fingers in her mouth, and I know then by the way she's studying me, her little eyes round as marbles, calm in her seat, . . . that she has it. Like me. That she can understand like I can, but even better, because she know how to do it now. Because she can look at me and know what I'm thinking, . . . , and she smiles around her wet fingers, her little teeth perfect and even as uncooked rice, and I know she hears me" (Ward 2017 140).

[17] Ward shares with Díaz an approach to literature as a powerful, productive force, capable of overthrowing oppression and marginalization both in reality and on the level of imagination. This suggests that her work fit better within a decolonial rather than postcolonial critical framework, although it is important to remember that African Americans never actually were a colonized people.

succeed, she must embrace—that is, identify with—her Dominican roots (Gonzalez 2015, 76).

Similarly, Kayla weaves the past, present, and future of her family into a single thread, by simultaneously restoring a positive relationship with her mixed ancestry and hope for posterity. As argued by Petrelli, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* "echoes James Baldwin's admonition . . . that African Americans cannot have a future unless they accept their past" (2020, 285). To this purpose, Ward suggests that stories and literature be understood and exploited as an affirmative political act, prompting African Americans to resume agency in the remembrance of their past as well as in the construction of tomorrow. Kayla responds to this call to action by turning her limited ability to speak into an occasion for denouncing and overturning all the performative social constructs which are normally used to oppress and marginalize African Americans and other minority groups—from gender to race to the innocence of childhood. Her chunked sentences, made up of verbs at the imperative form, are not simply a regular feature of the intermediate stage of children's speech development, but utterances that are, or are part of, "the doing of an action" (Austin 1962, 5-6). At the end of the novel, Kayla's short commands, addressed first to Pop and Jojo—"Down," "Down, Pop. Please," "Yes"—then to the multitude of shuddering ghosts—"Go home"—(Ward 2017, 225), make way for a song, a positive, redemptive performance in which all African Americans, living and dead, can finally regain their individual and collective identity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ACLU. N.d. "School-to-prison Pipeline." https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline. (Accessed March 29, 2021).

Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*, edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisá. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Banks, Russell. 1991. *The Sweet Hereafter*. New York: HarperCollins.

Biedenharn, Isabella. 2017. "Jesmyn Ward on the Evolution of Her Haunting Novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*." Review of *Sing, Unburied,* Sing, by Jesmyn Ward. *Entertainment Weekly*, September 11, 2017. https://ew.com/books/2017/09/11/jesmyn-ward-sing-unburied-sing/.

Chevalier, Victoria A. 2020. "The Multiplicity of This World: Troubling Origins in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier, 215-235. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39835-4_10.

Choi, Sodam. 2018. "The Haunted Black South and the Alternative Oceanic Space: Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*." *The Journal of English Language and Literature* 64:433-51. doi:10.15794/jell.2018.64.3.008.

Díaz, Junot. 2007. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead.

Dib, Nicole. 2020. "Haunted Roadscapes in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 45 (2):134-153. muse.jhu.edu/article/762138.

Faulkner, William. 2013 (1930). *As I Lay Dying*. London: Vintage Books. Kindle edition.

Gonzalez, Christopher. 2015. *Reading Junot Díaz*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Hajela, Deepti and Lindsay Whitehurst. 2021. "'I Am a Child!' Pepper Spray Reflects Policing of Black Kids." *U.S. News*, February 12. https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2021-02-12/i-am-a-child-police-pepper-spray-shows-kids-not-exempt.

Hartnell, Anna. 2016. "When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward's Disenchanted America. An Interview." *Journal of American Studies* 50, (1):205–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815001966.

Henderson, Carol E. 2002. *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Holland, Sharon P. 1994. ""If You Know I Have a History, You Will Respect Me:" A Perspective on Afro-Native American Literature." *Callaloo* 17, (1):334-50. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2932141.

_____. 2000. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Jackson, Charles O. 1977. "American Attitudes to Death." *Journal of American Studies* 11 (3):297-312. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27553308.

Khedhir, Yesmina. 2020. "Ghosts Tell Stories: Cultural Haunting in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*." *B.A.S. British and American Studies* 26:17-23. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=871062.

Keeble, Arin. 2020. "Siblings, Kinship and Allegory in Jesmyn Ward's Fiction and Nonfiction." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 61 (1):40-51. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2019.1663145.

Kliff, Sarah. 2018. "American kids are 70 percent more likely to die before adulthood than kids in other rich countries." *Vox*, January 8. https://www.vox.com/health-care/2018/1/8/16863656/childhood-mortality-united-states.

Lee, Raymond L. M. 2002. "Modernity, Death, and the Self: Disenchantment of Death and Symbols of Bereavement." *Illness, Crisis & Loss* 10 (2):91-107. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/105413730201000201.

National School Boards Association. 2020. "Black Students in the Condition of Education 2020." June 23. https://nsba.org/Perspectives/2020/black-students-condition-education.

Mbembé, J.-A., and Libby Meintjes. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15 (1):11-40. muse.jhu.edu/article/39984.

Mellis, James. 2019. "Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*." *Religions in African American Popular Culture* 10 (7):403. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10070403.

Novoa, Christina, and Jamila Taylor. 2018. "Exploring African Americans' High Maternal and Infant Death Rates." *Center for American Progress*, February 1. https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2018/02/01/445576/exploring-african-americans-high-maternal-infant-death-rates/.

Petrelli, Marco. 2020. "A Darkness Endemic to Mississippi – Jesmyn Ward's Haunted Places." *Iperstoria* 16:278-292. https://iperstoria.it/article/view/925/912.

Quinn, Annalisa. 2017. "'Sing' Mourns The Dead, Both Buried And Unburied." Review of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, by Jesmyn Ward. *NPR*, September 6. https://www.npr.org/2017/09/06/547560046/sing-mourns-the-dead-both-buried-and-unburied?t=1596873114079.

Ruin, Hans. 2019. *Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Shockley, Evie. 2002. Review of *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, and: *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, by Russ Castronovo. *American Literature* 74 (3):683-685. muse.jhu.edu/article/1855.

Smith, Zadie. 2020. *Intimations. Six Essays*. Penguin Books. Ebook.

Stockton, Kathryn Bond. 2009. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Ward, Jesmyn. 2008. *Where the Line Bleeds*. Evanston: Agate Publishing.

_____. 2011. *Salvage the Bones*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

_____. 2017. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. New York: Simon & Schuster. Pdf format.

Weber, Max. 2005. "Science as Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays In Sociology,* translated and edited by H. H. Gerth, and C. Wright Mills, 12-156. Abingdon: Routledge.

Webster, Crystal. 2020. "Black children have always known state violence." *The Washington Post*, June 15. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/15/black-children-have-always-known-state-violence.

Elisa Pesce earned her MA in Modern Languages and Literatures (American Studies) from the University of Turin and is currently a second year Ph.D. student in English Literature at the University of Glasgow. Her research project investigates the reasons underlying the omission of women from maximalist models by assessing the scope and implications of this narrative mode in the framework of contemporary cultural production in the United States. It also correlates ongoing issues around minorities' discrimination to hegemonic standards of genre (in particular the epic) and canon formation, demonstrating their connection to questions of power. Email: e.pesce.1@research.gla.ac.uk